

**FUNERARY PRACTICES AND GRAVE TYPES OF 2<sup>ND</sup>- 3<sup>D</sup> C. AD  
IN THE ROMAN CEMETERIES OF MARCIANOPOLIS  
(DEVNYA, BULGARIA)**

**Alexander Minchev (Bulgaria)**

*Key-words:* Marcianopolis, funerary practices, Roman time.

*Abstract.* Excavations conducted at the cemeteries of Marcianopolis, a major Roman city of Moesia Inferior Province, revealed both typical and some unusual funerary practices used by local citizens. Most of burials were made by inhumation and only a few by cremation. The funerary practices at Marcianopolis show a diversity, which was due to its multi-ethnic population and various traditions in the city.

Ever since its localization in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ancient city of Marcianopolis in Moesia Inferior (in Northeastern Bulgaria) has always attracted the minds and efforts of many scholars because of its long and most successful history. During 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>d</sup> c. AD it was a major Roman economical, military and administrative centre, which benefited a lot due to its closeness to the Western Black Sea coastline and well organized road system in the region. After late 3<sup>d</sup> c. AD when the city was appointed for capital of the newly established Late Roman province of Moesia Secunda, Marcianopolis had its second boom-time in Late Antique period, mainly during 4<sup>th</sup>- mid5<sup>th</sup> c. AD (Gerov 1975, 49-72). Now its ruins are covered over by the contemporary town of Devnya. According to Iordanes, the city was established under Trajan at the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD most probably shortly after AD 204-205 and was named after Emperor's sister Marcia or Marciana (Iord. Get. 93; Amm. Marc. XXVII, 4, 12; Dexipp., fr. 25 (Jacoby). Some sparse finds suggest a much earlier occupation of the site too – a long time before the Romans occupied the Balkan Peninsula and incorporated its main parts in the provinces of Moesia and Thracia (Minchev 2004, p. 215-235 and bibl.).

The excavations of the ancient ruins started as early as late 19<sup>th</sup> century if we do not have in mind some unofficial research made at the site by the Russian occupation troops during Russian-Turkish War of 1828-1829 (Gerov 1975, S. 52-53 and bibl.). The research of the site was carried out continuously up to present days with some disturbances during and between the two Great Wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gerov 1975, S. 49-72 and bibl.; Ангелов 1999, с. 5-7).

By now, only a relatively little part of ancient city's four cemeteries has been properly investigated and studied. They expand about 600 m to the East and over one km to the West of the city fortress walls (Минчев, Георгиев 1979, с. 101-111; Ангелов 1985, 55-62; Ангелов 1987, с. 161-162; Ангелов 1988, с. 123-124; Ангелов 2002, с. 118-119 and bibl. & data by unpublished ones), while to the South the cemetery limits are not clear yet. It seems that it goes probably also at a length of at least two or three hundred meters south of the wall (Ангелов 1983, с. 84-88). A smaller city cemetery (or a continuation of the West one?) was localized in North-West direction too (fig. 2), where probably mostly Roman and some Late Roman graves covered by tumuli were situated (Ангелов 1982, с. 99-102 and bibl.). In the Eastern and Western necropolises graves of both Roman, Late Antique/ Early Byzantine periods (e. g. 2<sup>nd</sup>- late 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD) have been found, while the South and probably the Northwest ones were maybe in use mostly if not only during Roman time (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>d</sup> c. AD).

The number of graves of Roman period (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>d</sup> c. AD) excavated so far at all four cemeteries is about one hundred, but not all of them have been published properly and quite a few of them (excavated in the late 80-ies of 20<sup>th</sup> century) are not published yet. Nevertheless these, which the scholarly world is

familiar with, help enough to offer a general review of the funerary practices, which the citizens of Marcianopolis used during this period.

During these two centuries, which mark the most powerful Roman rule in the region funerary traditions in the city cemeteries included both inhumation and cremation. The local people practiced inhumation to a considerably higher degree, while cremation was in use quite rarely, if not an exception. The later one was practiced by some citizens in a peculiar way too.

All graves of Roman Period are orientated in North-South or Northeast-Southwest direction. Some of them were covered by tumuli of various sizes and heights. The tumuli-graves were beyond any doubt an important symbol of the social status of buried persons, but some of them maybe indicate their ethnic identity i. e. they belonged to some local citizens of Thracian origin in particular. Social status is proved also by some grave types, the diversity and richness of some burials. They consist usually of pottery, pottery lamps and glass vessels while in some occasions various bronze vessels, bone objects of daily life, gold jewelry, folded chairs are included too.

According to all available data of published excavations in all three cemeteries, the following types of inhumation have been recorded.

1. INHUMATION accomplished in a simple grave-pit of rectangular or trapezoid shape (figs. 3-4). By some graves the pit corners are rounded. Sometimes the graves have no visible traces of cover over. Maybe for the purpose wooden planks were used occasionally, which under environmental circumstances of the region are hardly to distinguish in the local soil. New or secondary used roof tiles covered quite often these graves (fig. 3). Their orientation is usually North-South, or Northeast-Southwest, which depends obviously on the time of the year the burial was made. The head of the buried person is generally set to the South, the arms laid by the body (skeleton). The grave goods/ funerary gifts (if any!) are laid either by the feet, next to the body or occasionally by the head (Минчев/ Георгиев 1979, с. 104, № 1, табл. VII/ 1; с. 108, № 28, табл. IX/ 28, etc.). Sometimes there are coins set in the mouth or laid by the hand (held in it?). This funerary practice started in 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD and continued well into the 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD, at least until the middle of the century and maybe later too.
2. INHUMATION accomplished in a simple grave-pit of rectangular or trapezoid shape covered by a tumulus (fig. 5). Their orientation is mainly Northeast-Southwest, the head probably set to the South. Funerary gifts are deposited by the feet. They are dated to 2<sup>nd</sup>- early 3d c. AD (Ангелов 1982, с. 102 and unpublished ones).
3. INHUMATION accomplished in a grave-pit of rectangular shape marked at one long side by secondary used bricks or roof tiles (fig. 6). They are usually inserted at its Eastern side. The grave orientation is North-South or Northeast-Southwest. The head is set to North/ Northeast, the hands laid along the body. If there are funerary gifts, they are enclosed by the feet or by head (Минчев/ Георгиев 1979, с. 109, No 35, табл. X/ 35 and unpublished ones).
4. INHUMATION accomplished in wooden coffin enclosed within grave pits of rectangular shape (fig. 7). Their orientation is also North-South or Northeast-Southwest. They have either no cover above, apart from the coffin's planks or occasionally there are tiles laid over the coffin. The head of the buried person is usually set to the North/ Northeast, the arms laid by the body (skeleton). Funerary gifts occur usually by the feet or occasionally out of the coffin (Минчев/ Георгиев 1979, с. 108, No 30, табл. XI/ 30).
5. INHUMATION accomplished in rectangular tombs made of stone slabs and covered by flat roof of similar slabs (figs. 8-10). Usually the covering slabs are carefully worked out but sometimes they were left roughly cut, or there are secondary used ones including older gravestones with inscriptions and relief. The orientation of the tombs is East-West or Northeast-Southwest. The floor may be either of plain or rammed ground soil, or made of bricks or of stone slabs. The body lays with its head set to North/ Northeast, the hands laid by the body. Grave goods/ funerary gifts are enclosed either by head or feet but also by both head and feet. Occasionally these tombs may have a rectangular entrance almost square in shape cut in its North side, where from during secondary burials the next body was placed in. Very rarely the walls are covered carefully by one-colour plaster coating. These tombs were often used secondary or several times (up to five skeletons have been found within a tomb!). It means they were marked in some way on the surface, most probably by gravestones. The tombs of this type were covered usually (if not always, which is difficult to

6. INHUMATION accomplished in rectangular tombs constructed of limestone slabs and covered by a triangular roof, made also of two large stone slabs (fig. 11). The floor is often deliberately flattened using rammed soil or clay. Their orientation is East-West or Northeast-Southwest. The bodies were laid with their heads to the North. Several tombs were in fact family graves used more than once, which indicate some sort of mark on the surface. It is quite possible this was done by means of a gravestone. Funerary gifts are usually laid by the feet. When secondary burial was accomplished the bones and grave goods of the previous one were transmitted to the Southern part of the tomb (Ангелов 1983, с. 85-86, табл. I/ 1).

7. INHUMATION accomplished in tombs constructed by bricks fixed by means of mortar (fig. 13). They are rectangular in shape and made of locally produced bricks. The floor is often made of large (0.47 x 0.47 x 0.07 m) or ordinary Roman type bricks (0.35 x 0.35 x 0.04 m). Some of the tombs are vaulted while some other ones were covered by specially made very large and thick roof tiles. The tombs are orientated East-West or Northeast-Southwest (Ангелов 1983, с. 84-85, табл. I/ 2-4 and unpublished ones).

8. INHUMATION accomplished in stone sarcophagus with triangular roof, each part cut of a single piece of stone (figs. 14-15). They are made either of local limestone or of imported Proconesian marbles. Some of the Proconesian sarcophagi have *tabula ansata* on their front side, while some other ones have apart from it roof decoration in relief imitating roof tiles. The locally produced ones follow the fashion of the imported ones but are usually of smaller dimensions. Some of them have decoration on the front walls and on narrow side of the cover, either engraved or in relief. The decoration is connected with the business of buried person and his religious beliefs (Ангелов 1983, с. 84-85, табл. IV/ 2-4).

9. INHUMATION accomplished in wooden coffin within a stone sarcophagus (fig. 16). Its orientation is Northeast-Southwest and the body was laid with his head to the South. Funerary goods were deposited in the north section of the coffin while all collected bones of previous inhumation in the same sarcophagus were deposited its Southern part. There was a tumulus erected over the sarcophagus. Tombs of this type are dated to 3d c. AD (Ангелов 1982, 99-102, табл. 1).

There are only a few cremation burials discovered so far in the Roman cemeteries of Marcianopolis. They present some peculiarities of this practice, which hardly could be traced anywhere else in Bulgaria. They occur occasionally in the West cemetery of the ancient city and mainly in the South one, where also most of the Thracian tumuli-graves have been excavated a long time ago. All cremation burials in Marcianopolis are dated mostly between mid- 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3d c. AD.

10. CREMATION accomplished in wooden coffin within a simple rectangular grave pit (fig. 19). The body was laid with its head to the North and hands on the belly. Pebbles covered the grave floor entirely. The tomb-shape is trapezoid and it was dug out in the ground according to that of the coffin. The later fits tidily in the pit. The tomb was orientated North-South. The coffin and its flat roof was made of wide wooden planks, fixed by iron nails. A not very large funeral pile of solid wooden beams was erected and fired over it. The walls as well as the tomb floor and all surrounding area were heated to red by the very high temperature of inside fire. According to the found relatively rich funerary gifts it was dated to second first half of 3<sup>d</sup> c. AD. They gifts were laid in the Northern part of the tomb and by the hands (Минчев/ Георгиев 1979, с. 106, № 12, табл. VI/1 and VIII/ 12).

11. CREMATION accomplished in rectangular tomb made of bricks and covered by flat roof of wooden planks fixed by nails. The tomb was orientated East-West, but according to the very rich funerary gifts found in, it was dated to second half of 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD. The floor of the tomb and the surrounding area were heated to red by the very high temperature of inside fire. Human bones mixed with ashes and coals were found scattered all over the floor, while the funerary gifts were laid patiently in the eastern part of the tomb.

They suggest a male burial in the tomb, which was covered by a large tumulus too (Ангелов 1986, 63-66, табл. I/1; ).

12. CREMATION accomplished in wooden coffin within a rectangular tomb constructed by bricks (fig. 20). The tomb is orientated East-West with slight deviation. It has a floor made of rammed soil and the tomb was covered by flat roof made of stone slabs. The floor and walls of the tomb and the surrounding area were heated to red by high temperature of the fire in. Male human bones mixed with ashes and charcoal was found over the floor offering no sure data about original position of the head (to the south?). Two groups of rich funerary gifts were added after the of the body was burned and laid next to it – in the middle and in the northeastern corner of the brick tomb. Never mind of its orientation, according to the found funerary gifts the burial was dated to mid-2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD (Nenova, Angelov 1999, pp. 49-59).

13. BURIAL accomplished in a stone cist-grave (fig. 21a). So far, only one cist-grave of rectangular shape and made of local limestone was found *in situ* in the Western cemetery of the ancient city. It was constructed immediately next (added) to a traditional tomb made of stone slabs and using its north wall for south one of the cist. Unfortunately, this interesting grave is not published yet apart from a plan and photo of both tombs and no data of the cist content are available. A date of 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD was suggested for both tombs (Ангелов 1999, с. 51) probably based on the funerary gifts found in.

14. Another evidence for a possible cist grave in the shape of a small sarcophagus is an unpublished cover of small dimensions. It has triangular roof and acroteria in the corners made just in the way the large sarcophagi were produced. The cover is carefully made of local limestone. It was found in the necropolis not *in situ* but reused in a much later burial. Therefore, we cannot be sure if this cover was originally upper part of a real cist-type grave, an *osteothecue*, or a small sarcophagus intended for child burial (Ангелов 1999, с. 49, no illustration). Under circumstances, only a general date of 2<sup>nd</sup>-3d c. AD may be suggested for the type.

Most of the listed funerary practices and fourteen types of graves, which occur in the cemeteries of Marcianopolis, especially all inhumation ones have been traced in other Roman city- and village cemeteries of 2<sup>nd</sup>-3d c. AD in Bulgaria (in the provinces of Thracia and Moesia Inferior) and beyond in the Roman empire. They occur in general during same time duration and some of them continued to be accomplished also in Late Antique-Early Byzantine period.

An exception in the Roman cemeteries of Marcianopolis appeared to be the practice of cremation on the site within a coffin and within a stone-built tomb (figs. 19-20). These peculiar types of burials seem to have been accomplished mostly during earlier times of city existence: ca mid- to second half of 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD. It was allegedly applied by burials of mostly (if not only) male persons of Thracian origin. Only one similar burial occurs so far in Bulgaria, namely in a mid-2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD Thracian tumulus-grave in Maglizh by Kazanlak, in Southern Bulgaria (Гетов 1969, с. 45).

Quite unusual is also the combination of stone-built grave with a cist-grave next to it constructed in the same way (fig. 21)

Therefore, this peculiar burial practice may have a straight connection to the Thracians, which settled in Marcianopolis. They came over to the city of possibly from its vicinity, where this population originated from. The roots of this Roman time practice of burial of the local people are going most probably farther back in time – in some ancient Thracian funerary practice of Hellenistic or of even much earlier period.

The excavation of ancient cemeteries of Marcianopolis will continue in the future too. I do hope that they will add some new information on the subject studied here. Nevertheless, even now the diversity of funeral practices, which its citizens accomplished during 2<sup>nd</sup>-3d c. AD reflect the multi-ethnic culture combining traditional habits of the local population and influences of the newcomers to this area. Later on, after adopting the Christianity in 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD, the funerary practices partially changed became amalgamated and reduced in diversity. By that time, due to early adopting of this religion in the area, there is no way to distinguish the differences among the burials of local people which had various ethnic or regional origins.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Ангелов, Ан. 1999. *Марцианопол – история и археология*, Барс-агенция, Варна.
- Ангелов, Ан. 2002. Мацианопол (Marcianopolis), с. 105-124. In: *Римски и ранновизантийски градове в България* (съст. Р. Иванов), Иврай, София.
- Ангелов, Ан. 1982. Погребения в саркофаг от Марцианопол, *ИНМВ* 18 (32), с. 99-103.
- Ангелов, Ан. 1983. Гробни находки от южния некропол на Марцианопол, *ИНМВ* 19 (33), с. 84-88.
- Ангелов, Ан. 1985. Гробни находки от западния некропол на Марцианополис, *ИНМВ* 21 (35), с. 55-62.
- Ангелов, Ан. 1986. Могилна гробна находка от Марцианопол, *ИНМВ* 22 (36), с. 63-67.
- Ангелов, Ан. 1987. Спасителни разкопки в м. “Кабата” при гр. Девня (западен некропол на Марцианопол). – *АОР за 1986*, с. 161-162 (Разград).
- Ангелов, Ан. 1988. Спасителни разкопки в м. “Кабата” при гр. Девня. – *АОР за 1987*, с. 123-124 (Благоевград).
- Гетов, Л. 1969. Трако-римски могили погребения от Казанлъшко., *Археология* XI, 1, с. 41-46.
- Минчев Ал., Георгиев, П., 1977. Разкопки в Марцианопол през 1975 г., *ИНМВ* 15 (30), с. 101-111.
- Мирчев, М. Антични предмети от Марцианопол, *ИБАИ* XV, 1946, с. 187-192.
- Angelov, A., Conrad, S., Luppe, W. 1998. Zwei Grabstellen aus Marcianopolis, *Archaeologia Bulgarica* II, 1, S. 77-80.
- Gerov, B. 1975. Marcianopolis im Lichte der historischen Angaben, und archäologischen, epigraphischen und numismatischen Materialien und Forschungen, *Studia Balcanica*, 10, S. 49-72 (= Recherches de géographie historique, II, Sofia).
- Minchev, Al. 2004. Marcianopolis before the Romans: Some Data about Earlier Settlements at the Site, pp. 215-235. In: *Prinos lui Petre Diaconu la 80 de ani*. Editura Istros Călărași (Eds. I. Căndea, V. Sîrbu, M. Neagu; Brăila).
- Nenova, R. Angelov, An. 1999. A Rich Thracian’s Grave from Marcianopolis, *Archaeologia Bulgarica* III, 2, pp. 49-59.

Alexander Minchev  
 Museum of Varna  
 E-mail: [al\\_minchev@abv.bg](mailto:al_minchev@abv.bg)



Fig. 1. Map of Western Black Sea coast and the layout of Marcianopolis.

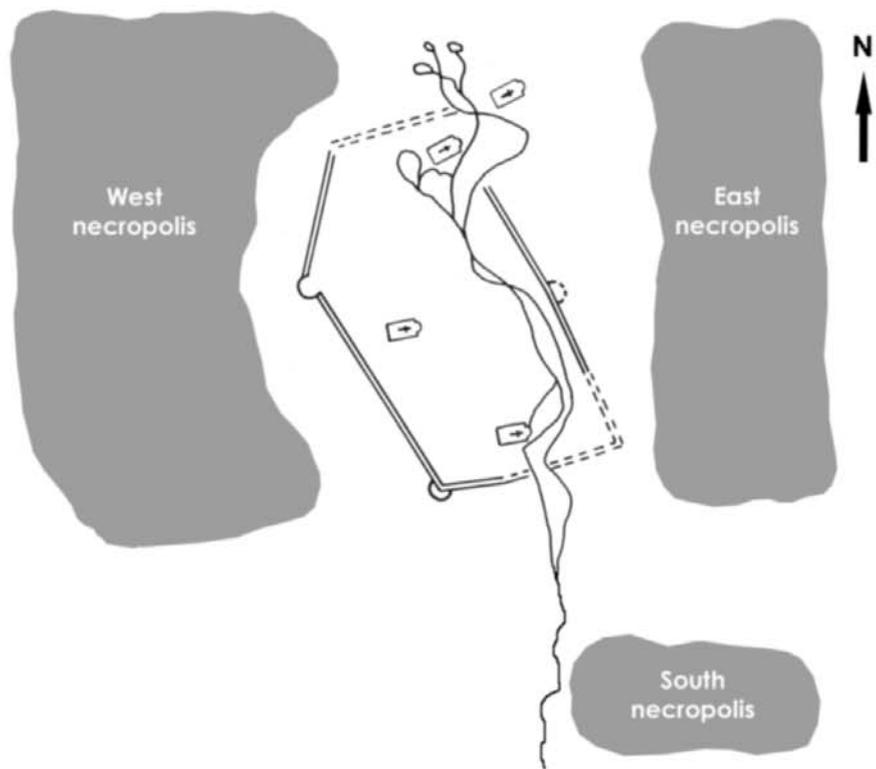


Fig. 2. Map of Late Roman Marcianopolis and its ancient cemeteries.

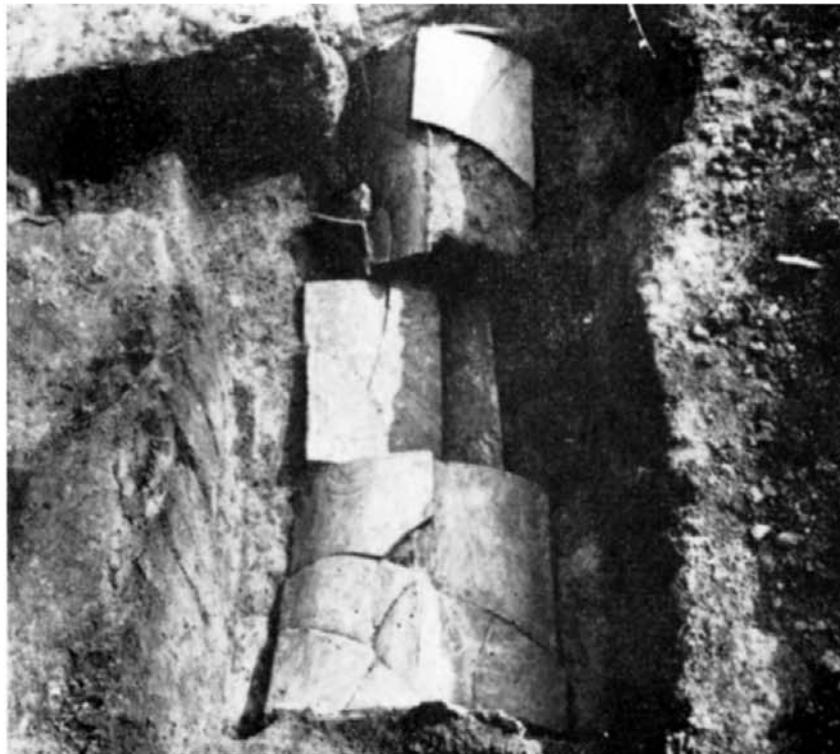


Fig. 3. Inhumation accomplished in a simple grave-pit covered by roof tiles.

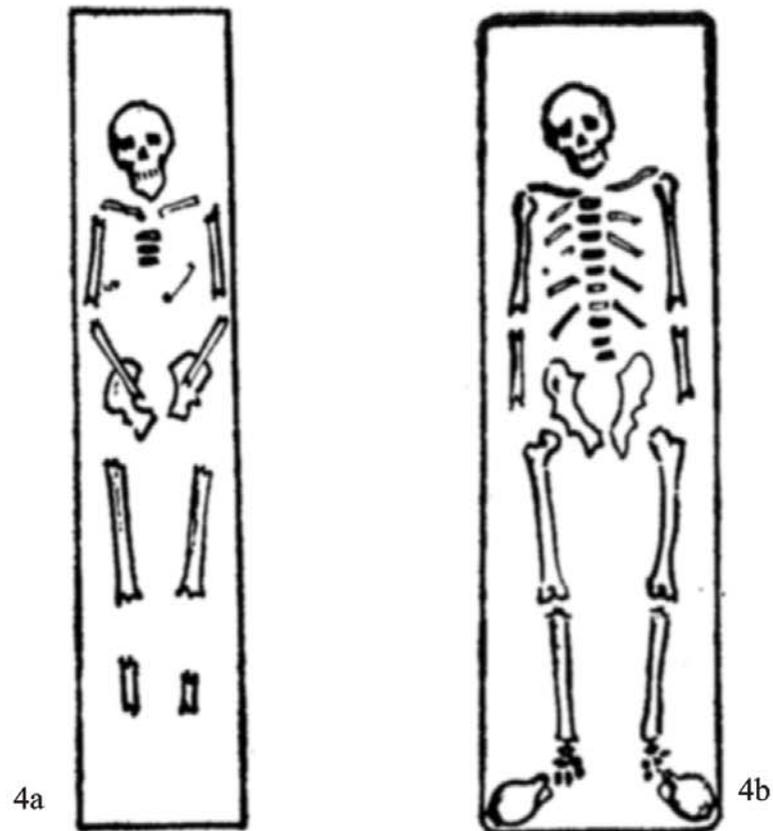


Fig. 4a-b. Sketches of simple grave pits with different layouts of the bodies.

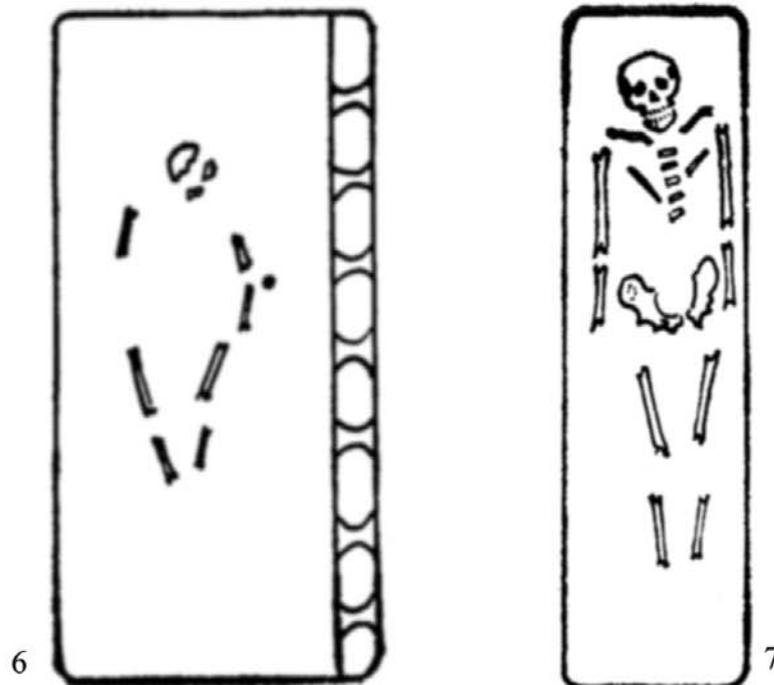


Fig. 6. Inhumation burial accomplished in a grave-pit marked at one long side by bricks.  
Fig. 7. Inhumation burial accomplished in grave-pit with a coffin in.

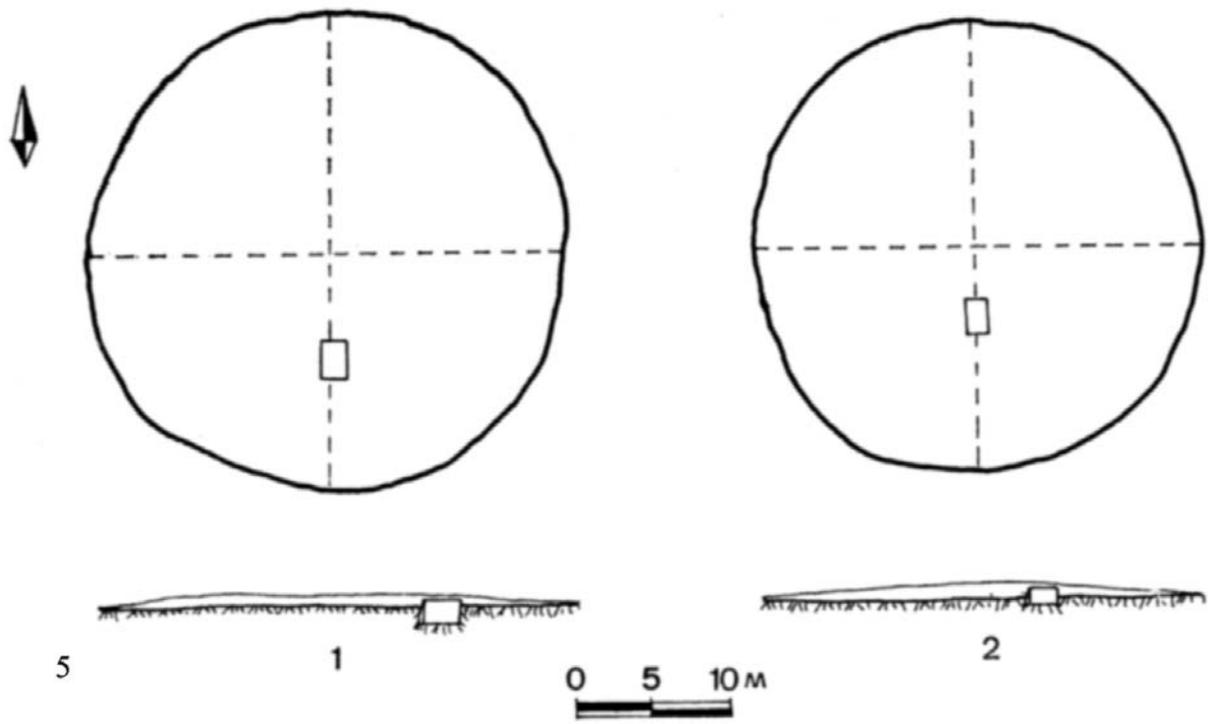
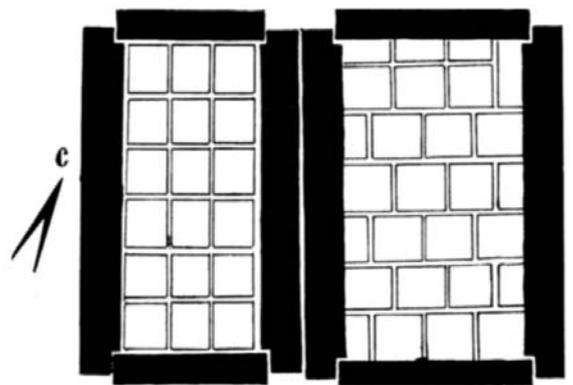


Fig. 5. Inhumation burial accomplished in simple grave-pit covered by tumulus (plan and cross-sections).



8a



8b

Fig. 8 a-b. Twin tombs made of limestone slabs with flat stone roof used for inhumation burials.

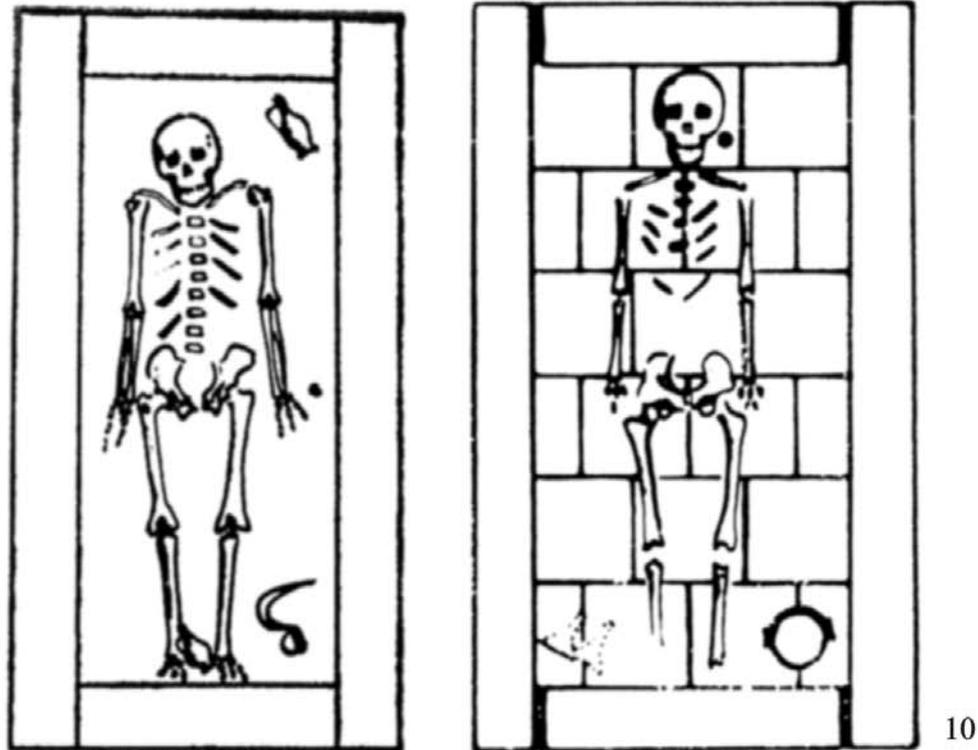


Fig. 9. Inhumation burial accomplished in a stone tomb with flat roof (sketch).  
Fig. 10. Inhumation burial accomplished in a stone tomb with flat roof and floor made of bricks (sketch).

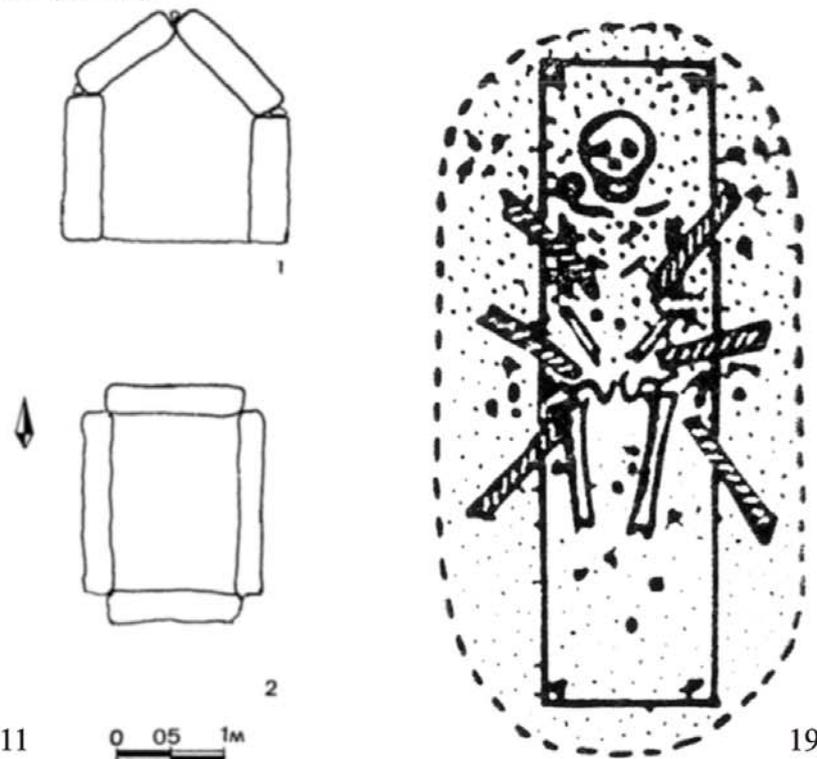
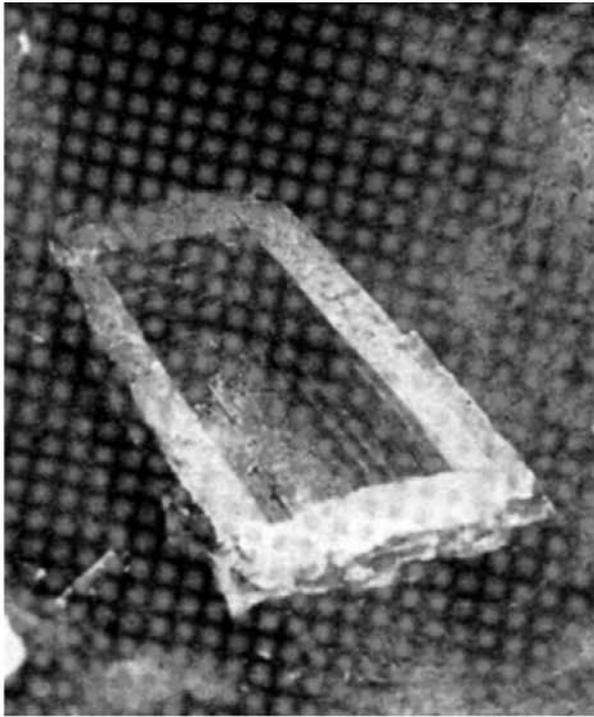


Fig. 11. Stone-made grave with triangular-shaped roof used for inhumation burial.  
Fig. 19. Cremation burial accomplished in situ within wooden coffin.



12



13

Fig. 12. Grave constructed by bricks and used for inhumation burial.

Fig. 13. Grave used for inhumation, constructed by bricks and covered by special large roof-tiles.



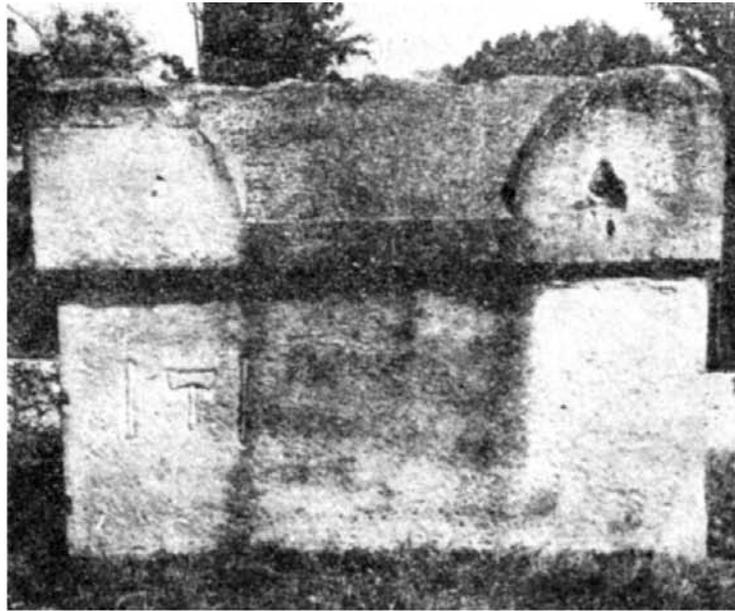
14



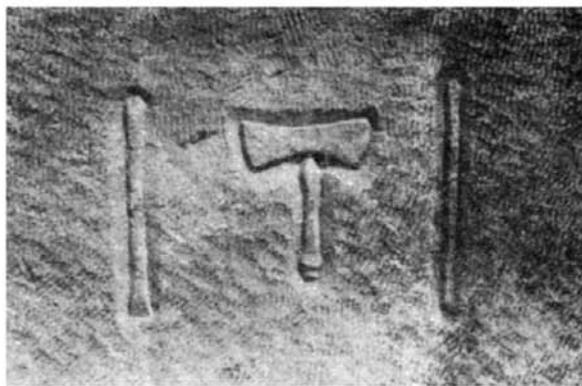
15

Fig. 14. Imported sarcophagus of Proconesian marble with *tabula ansata* used for inhumation.

Fig. 15. Unfinished sarcophagus of Proconesian marble with roof-like decorated cover used for inhumation burial.



16



17a



17b



17c

Fig. 17. Detail photos of engraved decoration: stone-mason's tools, a Gorgon and rosette.



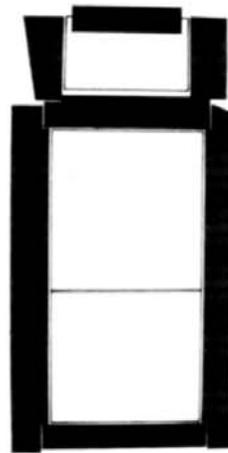
18  
Fig. 18. Double inhumation burial in stone-made tomb.



19. Cremation burial accomplished *in situ* within wooden coffin.



20



21

Fig. 20. Cremation burial accomplished in situ within a brick-built tomb.

Fig. 21. Stone-made cist grave constructed next to a stone-made tomb.