

INVESTIGATIONS OF THE MYRMEKION EXPEDITION IN 2014–2018

Over the last five years, the Myrmekion expedition of the State Hermitage museum continued a comprehensive study of the ancient settlement of Myrmekion, located in the modern town of Kerch in the area of Cape Karantiny (Cape Quarantine). Initially, the main efforts of the expedition were concentrated on sector “I” in the central part of the settlement. After the completion of this task, the center of gravity of the expedition’s work was focused on excavations in the area of the Karantiny (Quarantine) Rock in sector “TS” (Fig. 1).

In the preceding period, investigations of a part of Hellenistic ash-hill II were carried out at sector “I”.¹ After the complete removal of the ash-hill layers, traces of a Classical time building were found underneath and were most completely excavated in 2013. Just a small building measuring 1.56×2.4 m with a stone pavement and the remains of a furnace were explored here only in 2014. It is interesting that the house was built immediately above the pavement of an earlier street.

The main purpose of the excavation of ash-hill II was to investigate a wide area below a building of the Late Archaic period. The eastern sector of this block, as well as part of the northern household of the western sector, had been investigated before 2013. In 2014–2016, a significant area of the Archaic quarter was unearthed under the ash-hill and excavations were carried out in order to prove the supposition that it continued to the south.²

As a result, other economic areas, separated by a wall from the eastern sector, were excavated here. On the northern side of the site there was a dwelling house stretched out in the latitudinal direction, and in the south there was a courtyard parallel to it and paved with stone.

¹ Butyagin 2015a, 429–434; Butyagin 2015b [А. М. Бутягин, “Раскопки городища Мирмекий в 2010–2013 гг.”], 770–773.

² Butyagin–Chistov 2015 [А. М. Бутягин, Д. Е. Чистов, “Палеорельеф Карантинного мыса и архаическая застройка Мирмекия”], 31–35.

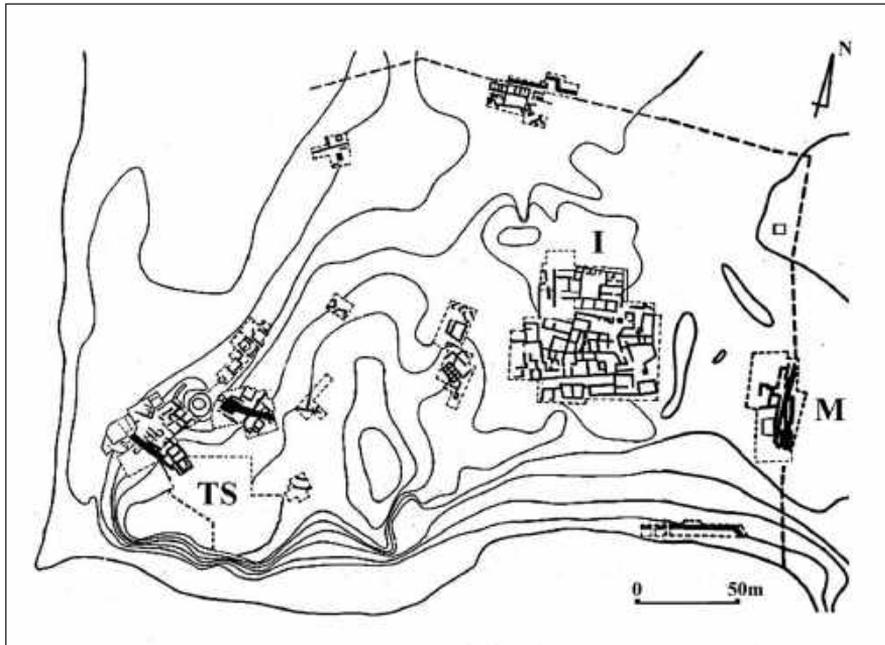


Fig. 1. Scheme of the Myrmekion site.
The marked areas were excavated in 2014–18

The houses were composed of 2–3 rooms. The buildings bear traces of repeated reconstructions and the pavements showed multiple renewals. The dimensions of the buildings are 5.5×16 m; the courtyards were measuring 4.5×16 m. The average thickness of the stone plinths of the house walls was 0.5 m. On the west side, the quarter was bounded by a street about 3 m wide, and in the southern part of the site, stretched along the slope, a stone pavement was constructed with a narrow drain. Presently, the Late Archaic block excavated in Myrmekion is one of the best preserved ones in the entire ancient Bosphorus (Fig. 2).

At the west side of the street, a poorly disturbed masonry of buildings of the next quarter was uncovered. Of the most interest is a structure in the northern part of the excavation area. Here, a small room with traces of several reconstructions was found. It is noteworthy that, from the side of the street, the masonry was lined with large orthostatic polygonal stone plates. This type of construction has been first encountered in Myrmekion. Possibly, the building was of a public character, although no other evidence of this fact has been discovered.

It was suggested that the quarter under study continued in the southern direction. In order to prove this supposition excavations were started

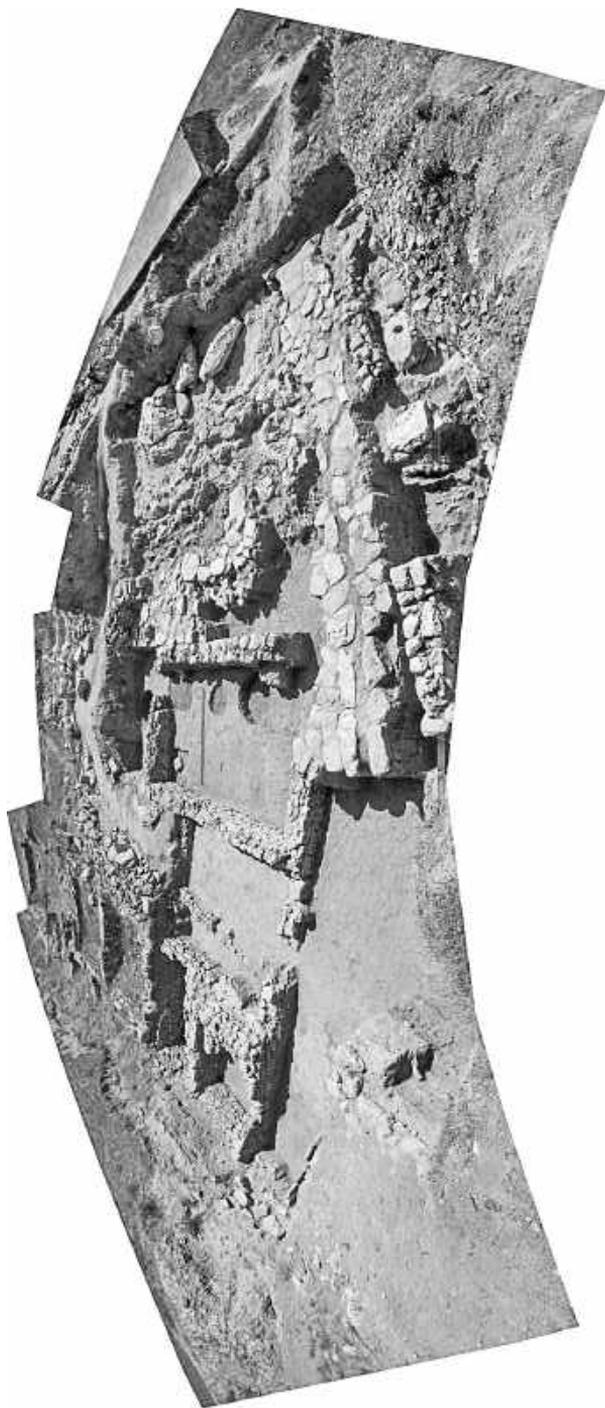


Fig. 2. Street and houses of the first half of the 5th cent. BC. Sector "I". Excavations of 2014. View from the west

which revealed structural remains of the Hellenistic and Roman period in the central part of sector “I”. These digs were continued along the presumed lines of the walls bounding the quarter and dividing the household areas comprised by it. However, no traces of the continuation of the quarter to the south were revealed. Apparently, the block was oriented in the latitudinal direction. In the course of the excavations, part of a quadrangular semi-dugout house measuring 3.1×1.5 m and dated to the 3rd quarter of the 6th century BC was uncovered. This was the second pit dwelling found in the central part of the site.

Among the numerous finds from the excavated area, including fragments of painted Attic vessels, noteworthy are paired bone scabbard chapes of swords-*kopides*. These were unearthed directly in the street, apparently, at the bottom of a deep puddle formed in an ancient gully.

In 2017–2018 in the northern side of sector “I”, a new excavation of about 80 sq. m was started at the cross-section of the street in order to uncover its intersection. However, the significant thickness of the cultural layer here will take several years to dig it. Presently, only traces of a surface structure of the Roman period and a courtyard fenced by a mudbrick wall have been discovered. A small bone figure of Mercury, probably a finial, is so far the most interesting finding from here.

In 2013, the excavations were concentrated at sector “TS” located north of the rock on which the Myrmekion acropolis is situated. Two lines of excavation squares of 5×5 m were started parallel to the southern border of the site. It turned out that during the World War II, the Wehrmacht conducted digging here, apparently for construction of anti-aircraft battery positions. As a result, the ancient layers turned to be overlapping the layer of the waste soil up to 1.2 m thick. It seems that in the course of these works, construction remains of the medieval period and the 19th century were disturbed. In the eastern part of the site, where the leveling of the soil was inconsiderable, it was possible to trace the remains of a large structure bordered by masonry of orthostate stone slabs of the 14th–15th centuries. The overall dimensions of the building were at least 10.5×5 m. In the northern part of the structure, a room was well preserved with traces of stone structures possibly left from a winery press. There were also numerous pits dated to the medieval period.

The main task at the site now is to continue the study of a large villa of the Roman time preliminarily dated to the 1st–2nd centuries AD. Part of it was discovered in the early 1990s and another area was investigated in the 2000s. It was established that during the construction of the villa, the earlier layers were carefully leveled almost down to the virgin soil. Along the edge of the cliff there was a terrace lined with stonework

probably built during the Hellenistic period. Several rooms were added to it; to the south of these rooms a courtyard was located. New excavations showed that the courtyard was fairly small, while to the south of it there were numerous rooms of different sizes. It was established that the villa was repeatedly reconstructed during the first half of the 2nd cent. AD. Afterwards it was demolished. It is of note that in the end of the 2nd and in 3rd cent. AD, some of the rooms of the villa were used for a new villa which was located to the southeast.

In the western sector, a room was excavated with several pithoi. A drain passed from the courtyard through the southern wall of the room, possibly for filling the pithoi with rainwater.³ Nearby, there was a large fragment of the lower part of a stone plate measuring 49×25×20 cm built into the wall (Fig. 3). This plate bore an inscription of seven lines containing a list of names attributed to the second half of the 1st cent. AD. So far, it is the largest lapidary inscription found in Myrmekion during all the years of excavations.⁴



Fig. 3. Fragment of the plate with a list of names.
First half of the 1st cent. AD. Limestone

³ Butyagin 2017 [А. М. Бутягин, “Водоснабжение древнего Мирмекия”], 34–37.

⁴ Bekhter–Butyagin 2017 [А. П. Бехтер, А. М. Бутягин, “Новый памятник лапидарной эпиграфики из Мирмекия”], 978–990; Bekhter–Butyagin 2016 [А. П. Бехтер, А. М. Бутягин, “Новый памятник лапидарной эпиграфики из Мирмекия”], 381–386.



Fig. 4. Fragmented statue of Asclepius.
1 cent. AD. Marble

In 2018, in the course of excavation of a stone accumulation covering the walls of the villa, a fragmentary marble statue 1.1 m high was uncovered (Fig. 4). This was a half-naked torso belonging probably to a sculpture of Asclepius. The right hand and ankles of the sculpture were broken off and the left hand and the head of the figure were fastened by pins, in antiquity, as may be judged through the holes left behind. The statue is excellently well preserved. This is the largest sculpture unearthed in Myrmekion by now. In addition, the torso of a small marble statue of a sitting male deity, possibly Jupiter, was found among stone debris of the medieval period. Presumably, these sculptures come from a sanctuary of the 1st cent. AD but the location of the latter is so far unknown.

In the western part of the site, under the walls of a manor and the pavement of a small courtyard, pits of an earlier period were preserved. In one of these, dated to the 4th cent. BC, wastes of bone-carving manufacture were found.⁵ From the same pit, the first lead letter from Myrmekion was recovered (Fig. 5). The letter is measuring 2.8–3.8×10.8 cm. The inner side of the roll contained 5 lines of the inscription and on the outside there were still 3 other lines. The letter was written by some Oreos and contains two messages sent to Pithokles and Kerchio[n?] concerned with trading operations of the author.

Near the pit, there was a burial dated to the Bronze Age with a skeleton in a crouched position on the side. A clay pot was a grave offering. Presumably, the interment belonged to the Srubnaya (Timber-Grave) archaeological culture dating from the 9th–11th century BC. Earlier, another such burial was discovered. Evidently during the Bronze Age, there was a necropolis on Cape Karantinny.

⁵ Behter–Butyagin–Dana 2018 [А. П. Бехтер, А. М. Бутягин, М. Дана, “Свинцовое письмо из Мирмекия”], 901–918.

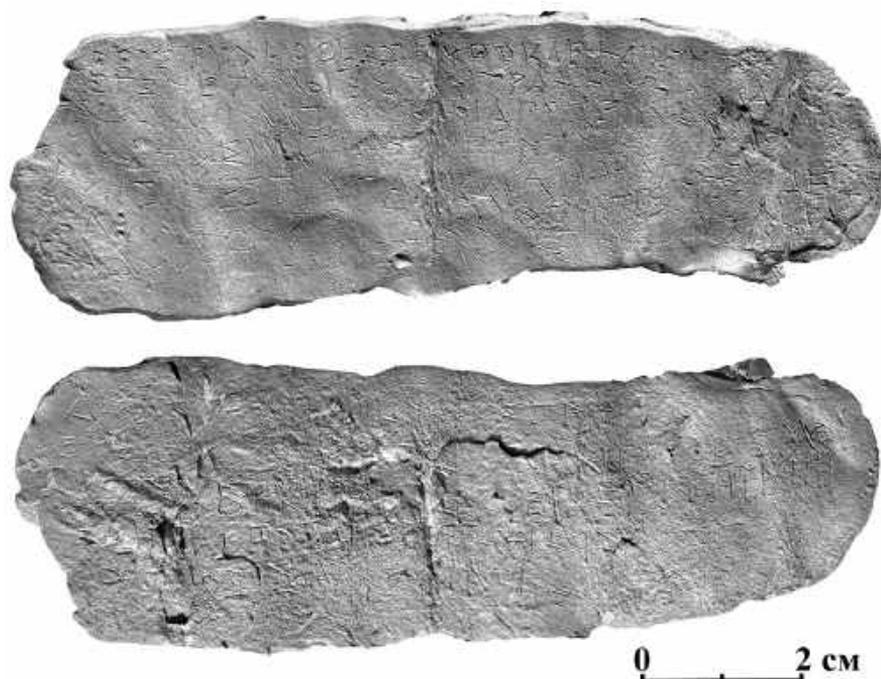


Fig. 5. Two-sided lead letter. 4th cent. BC

In 2017–2018, new investigations were started in sector “M” located near the eastern border of the ancient town. Here no works had been carried out after the expansive studies in 1957–1958. At the site, the ground surface and excavated structures had been overgrown with plants. The investigations were resumed in order to clarify the boundaries of the city at the early 5th century BC. It was supposed that the previous digs had not reached the Late Archaic layer presumably present here. Therefore the work was started immediately within the boundaries of the old excavation area. Previously discovered remains of a winery of the Hellenistic period were cleared out. It became then evident that the researchers generally had reached the virgin soil during the investigations of the 1950s, but did not excavate some spots of the pits here. The renewed excavations revealed six burials dated to the second half of the 6th cent. BC and several pits of different periods. In the next season, two more graves were discovered. A total of three burials of children in amphorae, three graves with crouched skeletons and two burials with the dead lying supine on their backs were excavated. The grave inventory was extremely scarce including gray-polished pots of a similar type from burials with the dead

crouched and supine on the back. Noteworthy is the number of the types of burials within a rather small area. Presently, this is the earliest part of the necropolis of Myrmekion. The presence of children's burials in amphorae suggests that in the second half of the 6th century BC there was a permanent Greek population at the settlement.

In addition, in 2015, minor investigations were carried out in the territory of the 'Moscow-Crimea' (formerly 'Kiev') hotel in order to check the presence of a cultural layer here. No traces of the latter however have been found.

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