



Myrmekion

Summary :

Myrmekion is located in the eastern part of the modern city Kerch (Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine), 4 km NE of ancient Panticapaeum on the bank of the Kerch bay near the cape Karantiny. The settlement was founded by Ionians in the first half of the 6th c. BC and evolved into a small city which existed throughout Antiquity. After the destruction in the middle of the 1st c. BC it relived for 50-60 years as a cluster of farms. Life there went on till the turn of the 3rd-4th c. AD. The total area of the town was about 7-8 ha.

Other Names

Murmhkeion, Murmekion, Murmekiwn, Murmecion, Myrmecium

Geographical Location

Kerch, Crimea

Historical Region

Near Panticapaion

1. Location

The settlement was founded on the small cape Karantiny in the northern part of the bay of [Kerch](#). The cape was formed upon a calciferous rock 16.4 m high. There is a shallow bay hidden from the sea W of it (filled up nowadays). In ancient times a small river flowed into the bay. The rocky formation is located 100 m. E following a N-S direction. There is an open bay behind it which was probably used in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Its eastern end is marked with a small rock protruding to the sea. The territory of the settlement did not expand beyond that rock. The town had a shape of a regular quadrangle, following an E-W direction.

2. Settlement History - Literary Sources

In Antiquity, [Panticapaeum](#), capital of the [kingdom of Bosphorus](#), was located 4 km to the W; the river estuary separated it from the northern part of the bay.¹ Porthmeos, the site which controlled the northern crossing of the straits of Cimmerian Bosphorus, is located 7.5 km to the NE. Between these two sites there were some small settlements (e.g. Partheneos, the settlement on the Zmeiny (Snake) cape, etc.), but the rocky and precipitous coast made the approach of any ship difficult. In ancient times the rural area of Myrmekion could have included the entire north-eastern part of the Kerch Peninsula, but this is not a very plausible scenario. The settlement is identified in all ancient literary sources as being located next to Panticapaeum on the coast. The settlement was called Myrmekion (Murmhkeion, Murmekion, Murmekiwn, Murmecion, Myrmecium) throughout its history down to the Roman period; this remained the case even in some Byzantine sources. S. Zhebelev supposed that the name of the town could have been derived from the name of the oikistes. V. Gaydukevich proposed two variants - from the word «ant» (i.e. «town-of-the-ant-hill») or «reef», «single rock». The last variant seems to be truest. In the literary sources the site was variously defined as a town, a small town, a village and a cape, and this can reflect the status of the site in those times. Myrmekion was founded by [Ionians](#) at the turn of the 1st and the 2nd quarters of the 6th c. BC under the direction of [Miletus](#). Throughout Antiquity the population of the town was Greek, but in the 6th c. BC a large population of Maeotians was recorded, and since the 1st c. AD – of [Sarmatians](#). The settlement was mentioned in ancient [geography](#) works only from Classical to Byzantine times.²

3. Occupation patterns

The history of Myrmekion can be restored only from archaeology or indirectly based on a general idea of the history of the Bosphorus region. Throughout its history the town was considered one of the so-called “small” towns of Bosphorus, developed as part of the influence sphere of a larger city. For Myrmekion this city was Panticapaeum, but in this case there are certain elements worth mentioning.



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After the foundation by the Ionians at an instigation of Miletus at the turn of the 1st to the 2nd quarter of the 6th c. BC the settlement comprised of pit-dwellings and occupied not more than 4 ha. In the middle of the 6th c. BC part of the settlement was destroyed by fire, and the natural defence provided by the rock was reinforced by a wall. In the beginning of the 5th c. BC, houses were built up and the town reached its full size. Probably it was already under the reign of Panticapaeum, and in 480 BC it became part of the reign of the dynasty of the [Archaeanactids](#).

In the 2nd quarter of the century the settlement was destroyed, probably, by barbarians, and a new defensive wall enclosed the town in a perimeter of about 2 ha. In the 3rd quarter of the 5th c. BC, the situation returned to normal and soon the settlement assumed its previous size. In 438 BC it was included in the original state of the [dynasty of Spartocus](#). The destruction layer of the middle of the 4th c. BC has been identified. After the death of [Mithridates VI Eupator](#) in 63 BC the town was destroyed as a consequence of war. Life was restored only in the 1st quarter of the 1st c. AD in the days of king Aspurgos. At that time the settlement consisted of some big farms, probably without common fortification. In the 3rd quarter of the 2nd c. AD, the king of Bosphorus Tiberius Julius Eupator was buried there. In the turn of the 3rd – 4th c. AD the settlement was abandoned and burnt down. Later the site was inhabited again in 8th-9th and 13th-15th c.

4. History of Research

A site map was made by P. Debrux in the beginning of the 19th century. Subsequently, archaeological explorations were led by the directors of the Kerch museum, A. Lucenko in 1863 and F. Gross in 1885. From 1932 to 1966 the Bosphorus expedition under the direction of V. Gaydukevich conducted a systematic research of the site. In 1982-1994 the site was excavated by the expedition of the Leningrad branch of the USSR Archaeological Institute under the direction of Y. Vinogradov, and since 1999 archaeological digs have been led by the expedition of the State Hermitage Museum under the direction of A. Butyagin. The necropolis of Myrmekion was studied mainly in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century by A. Lucenko, F. Gross, K. Dumberg and V. Shkorpil. In 1953 S. Kaposhina studied the Hellenistic necropolis, and in the 1970s restoration work was conducted on the necropolis.

5. Economy

[Agriculture](#) probably constituted the basis of the economy of Myrmekion. Remains of barley and common wheat were found in graves of the end of the 6th c. BC. [Fishing](#) near the coast as well as in the open sea, including harvesting of sturgeon, had always been intensive in Myrmekion, and in the Roman period fish-tanks were constructed in the town, with a total capacity of ca. 116 m³. One of the most interesting facts is that there was an abundance of vineyards in the settlement from the 3rd c. AD until the destruction of the settlement. There were more than two dozens of them, hence V. Gaydukevich called the town “the town of winegrowers”. Both domestic wine-presses and large complexes with a capacity up to 5,000 lt. with stone presses were found, which produced wine for sale. [Jewellery](#) was produced here in the 5th-4th c. BC, based on form and style, however not in abundance. Traces of a home-based textile industry were also found in the form of a set of 71 loom weights from the end of the 3rd c. AD.

The place of the settlement in the structure of the state Bosphorus is not clear yet, but some very rich findings of the 4th-2nd c. BC, e.g. a fragment of a white crater, treasures of 99 electron [coins](#) from [Cyzicus](#) and pieces of carved bone and ivory, reveal that the settlement was extremely rich. We can suggest that residences of rich citizens from Panticapaeum also existed there. Some findings of Aspurgos tamga (seal) and tamga of a family close to the dynasty of Tiberius Julius can be assigned to the Roman period. This fact and the building of tombs on the cape bear testimony to the extraordinary imperial influence in later times.

6. Architecture

At this stage not a single building was found in the site, but a plethora of dedicatory graffiti, architectural parts, including cornices and column shafts, and ceremonial statues tell us about some sanctuaries. One of them was situated probably on the rocky part of the cape from the 6th c. BC till the 2nd c. AD. From the 5th c. BC they mention [Apollo](#) Ietros, [Heracles](#), and the Nymphs. A fragment of a dedication to Demeter Thesmophora on marble dates to the 4th c. BC. In the central part of the site they found some [houses](#) located in close proximity to each other which date to the 5th, 4th and 3rd centuries BC. The second one got the name of “sanctuary



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of Demeter"; some dedications to Zeus were also found there. After the destruction of this building, an ash-heap 3 m. high and a 500m² square were built above it in the 4th-3rd centuries BC. Aphrodite, Demeter, Kore and other gods were probably worshipped there. On the periphery of the ash-heap a fence was erected, and there were located many terracotta finds, including busts, coins, small vessels and items with dedicatory graffiti.

Probably in the Hellenistic period a stone chancel (2x2 m) was built near the rock. A small statue of Cybele dates to the Roman period, probably originating from a home shrine.

During the 6th c. BC the site consisted of square and round pit-dwellings in an irregular manner; the square ones measured around 4-12 m², and sometimes they were strengthened with stone walls. In the third quarter of the 6th c., a 20 m long [defensive wall](#) was built around the acropolis. In the beginning of the 5th c. BC the settlement looked like a town: in the central part there was a house block which measured no less than 25x30 m, and we can infer that there were several of them. The block consisted at least of two houses with yards and some surrounding buildings. The walls in the central part of the town followed the cardinal directions; pavements and paving streets were found. At that time the wall around the acropolis was strengthened and rebuilt. After the destruction of the houses in the second quarter of the 5th c. BC, a defensive wall 3 m wide was built in the western part of the settlement. In the next quarter of the century mud huts were built to the outside of it. In the 4th c. BC houses with yards and two-storey buildings were built all around the town. A hoard of 99 coins from Cyzicus in bronze [olpe](#) was found in the "sanctuary of Demeter"; it is the biggest one in the region N of the Black Sea. In the end of the 4th c. a defensive wall was built around the entire site, 2.5 m thick and with square towers. In the middle of the 3rd c. BC its eastern part was rebuilt and its thickness increased up to 3.2-3.8 m. At the end of the 4th c. BC in the western part of the site a pit 5x5 m was cut in the rock, and its interior was paved with big good stone blocks. This huge construction was not finished, but we can infer that it was either a tomb or the foundation of a tower. It was covered with a thick layer of ash, inside which they found a hoard of 723 copper coins of Panticapaeum of the 2nd quarter of the 3rd c. BC and a terracotta bust. There was an ash-heap in the central part of the site, and the rest of the territory was built up with small houses with yards and galleries. A home shrine was also found. The earliest wine-press installation with a platform and a tank of a capacity of 1,800 lt dates to the 3rd c. BC. After the destruction of the town in the 1st c. BC its reconstruction followed a different course. Buildings were erected in a haphazard manner throughout the site - among them buildings with thick walls are found - and there was one tower, its foundation lozenge-shaped. Houses were often combined with wine-presses and were designed for wine sale. A round tower 19 m in diameter from unhewn blocks was built on the cape in the 3rd quarter of the 2nd c.; this was a royal tomb. There was a two-room tomb inside, where an Attic sarcophagus with pictures of [Achilles'](#) life and a cover in the form of a couple in bed was found. At the end of the century, a large farm appeared in the vicinity with a two-storey house with basements, a big stone well and a large yard surrounded by utility rooms. Probably the fisheries belonged to this farm.

7. Necropolis

The [necropolis](#) of Myrmekion was located N of the town. Some graves from the 6th c. BC to the 3rd c. AD were found. There are many ground graves covered with flag stones. Some burial mounds date to the 4th-3rd c. BC. Earthen cists with a dromos and benches and rock-cut graves were also found.

1. Modern names: Melek-Chesme or Primorskaya.

2. Ps.-Skyl. 68; Strabo VII.4.5; XI.2.6; Ptol. III.6.3; Hdt. XIII.373.20; Anon. *PPE*. 76; Pomp.Mela. II.3; Plin. *NH* IV.87; Steph. Byz. s.v. Μυρμηκίων.

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Glossary :

	ολπε Some years ago it was considered as an oinochoe type. It is an ovoid and tall (if compared with its breadth) vessel with one high handle that surpasses its mouth. It is used for pouring liquids.
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Chronological Table

580-560 BC: Foundation of the Greek settlement



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3rd quarter of 6th c. BC: First fortification wall

Beginning of 5th c. BC: Expansion of the settlement, construction of first big houses

2nd quarter of 5th c. BC: Destruction of the main part of Myrmekion after Barbarian invasion

End of 4th c. BC: Construction of town fortification wall

Mid-1st c. BC: Total destruction of Myrmekion after the death of Mithridates VI Eupator

Beginning of 1st c. AD: Rebuilding of Myrmekion; irregular system of town-planning

3rd quarter of 2nd c. AD: Construction of the tomb of Tiberus Julius Eupator in Myrmekion

170 AD: Death and burial of Tiberus Julius Eupator

End of 3rd c. AD – Beginning of 4th c. AD: Final destruction of Myrmekion