



Summary :

Tanais is one of the most important ancient centres of the northern Black Sea, outstanding both due to its geographical location as well as for the peculiar conditions under which it was founded and grew. One of the determining features is that it was located at the nodal point where three peoples met: the Scythians, the Maeotians and the Sarmatians; it was also built at a great distance from the other centres of the Kingdom of Bosphorus. The ancient author Strabo preserves a wealth of information on this settlement.

Geographical Location

Black Sea

Historical Region

Cimmerian Bosphorus

Administrative Dependence

Kingdom of Bosphorus

1. Location

The geographer [Strabo](#)¹ relates that on the estuary of the river Tanais (modern Don) there is a settlement bearing the same name, Tanais, built by the Greeks inhabiting in the Cimmerian Bosphorus. Shortly before Strabo's time this city had been razed to the ground by king [Polemon](#)² of the [Kingdom of Bosphorus](#). Strabo then informs us that in earlier times Tanais was a common [emporion](#) for the nomads of Asia and Europe and for those sailing into the lake (i.e. Lake Maeotis, modern Sea of Azov) from the Cimmerian Bosphorus. The nomads brought in slaves, hides and various products of nomadic life, outsiders brought with them garments, wine and other products of the civilized world.

Strabo's passage in his *Geographia* concludes with the information that opposite the ancient settlement of Tanais lays the island of Alopecia, which is inhabited by a mixed population. Close to Alopecia lay other smaller islands. The distance from the northern edge of the Cimmerian Bosphorus to Tanais following a straight line to the north is 2,200 stadia, while in the case of maritime travel this distance is slightly greater. All these information given by the ancient geographer are crucial to understanding the history of the settlement. As we shall see below, this information is today confirmed by the results of the archaeological excavation conducted in the wider region.

2. Foundation

The Greek settlement-colony was founded in the 3rd cent. BC³ with the aim of facilitating commercial exchanges between the Greeks of the Kingdom of Bosphorus and the barbarian populations. For more than 700 years it remained the sole commercial, technological and cultural centre of the whole area around the Sea of Azov.⁴ The radiance of this settlement influenced several barbarian tribes, which should be taken into serious consideration in any attempt to study the history of the area around the Sea of Azov and especially its northern section. The influence Tanais exerted on its neighbouring populations is usually gauged via the examination of imported objects discovered in various barbarian sites of the wider region. The discovery of ancient Greek artefacts in the [Sarmatian](#) tombs of the Don and Volga rivers, even in the region of the southern Urals, should be attributed to the commercial activities of the inhabitants of Tanais. The abundance of imported pottery in the sites of the area of the southern Don is also correlated with the commercial character of the settlement.⁵

The site of Tanais itself has also yielded vast quantities of ancient amphorae found in underground storage rooms, which once more underlines its significance as a trading centre on the north-eastern fringes of the ancient ecumene, and a source of life for a extended area including the coasts of the Sea of Azov, the river Don and at least as far as the southern part of the Volga river. At any rate Strabo relates all the above⁶ and he is spectacularly confirmed by modern archaeological science.⁷



3. Archaeological research

Scientific investigation of the site commenced with the Russian archaeologist I.A. Stempkovsky, when in 1823 and 1824 he twice visited the area of the southern Don and identified the remains of an ancient settlement close to the modern village of Nedvigovga (at a distance of 35,000 English feet off the coast) as ancient Tanais. The first archaeological excavation on the settlement begun in the mid-18th cent. by P.M. Leodiev, Professor in the University of Moscow, who supported Stempkovsky's identification.⁸ The site has been almost continuously studied by archaeologists since then, and the current head of the archaeological expedition is the archaeologist T.M. Arsenyeva.⁹

Since its establishment, Tanais has developed as a Greek-barbarian commercial and technological centre of the remotest region of the ancient Greek ecumene. In the late 1st cent. BC the city was devastated by king Polemon of Bosphorus, but managed to recover fast. Thus, in the 2nd and 3rd cent. AD it enters its apogee. The most important architectural remains, among which are the storage areas containing amphorae, date to this period. In the mid-3rd cent. AD Tanais was captured and razed, most likely by some barbarian tribes belonging to the Gothic tribal alliance. Its destruction was so absolute that the city ceased to exist. The underground storage rooms either fell prey to the flames or were buried under the rubble of the demolished buildings. Nonetheless, in the mid-4th cent. AD civic life returns to the site of the ancient city, if for a short period, but by now nothing calls to mind the former glory of Tanais in the previous centuries. Archaeologists have discovered pottery sherds dating to the late 4th and early 5th cent. AD on the surface layer of the ancient settlement, which indicates that the city probably ceased to exist around the 5th cent. AD.¹⁰

4. Tanais, 3rd-1st cent. BC

Until recently very few evidence was available on the city's early period. Thanks to the extensive archaeological research of the last years we can say that we can draw a rather clear picture of Tanais before its destruction by king Polemon. On the west and south section of the site the settlement's fortifications have come to light. These date to the late 3rd cent. or the early 2nd cent. BC. Soon afterwards the south wall was moved slightly to the south. The western wall has been revealed to a length of 100m, although it was apparently incorporated into the main fortification works of the city during the Early Christian period. A series of various defensive towers rose along the western wall, two of which have been studied. Hellenistic residences have also been unearthed as well as the city's gate, which led from the north to an open-air square, free of any structures. Today it is impossible to reconstruct this northern gate with certainty and consequently any attempt at dating it remains fruitless. Archaeological research on the settlement has revealed two main streets, which run the city with a north-western and north-eastern direction. These streets were paved with gravel and pottery sherds. The northwest street has been revealed to a length of approximately 20m, offering archaeologists the chance to study its method of construction.

Archaeological research on the site has also revealed various points where numerous amphorae of Greek and local provenance were stored, dating to even the earliest phases of Tanais' existence. According to the geographer Strabo and other ancient authors, Tanais was an important commercial centre for the nomads of the steppes of the Sea of Azov and the Greeks of the Kingdom of Bosphorus. Archaeological research has shown this testimony to be true; it also appears that Rhodian amphorae were the main means of transporting Rhodian wine, although there are also amphorae from Kos, [Sinope](#), and [Cnidus](#) as well as from other ancient centres. From the seals on the amphorae we may deduce that the imports of Rhodian wine to Tanais were conducted without interruption throughout the 3rd and 2nd cent. BC. Tanais' commercial relations with the centres of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean were apparently maintained through most important Bosphoran cities. By analyzing these seals, as well as other evidence, we can see that the city of [Phanagoria](#) acted as the sole intermediary.

We scarcely have any information on the political situation in Tanais during its early history, i.e. for the period between the 3rd and 1st cent. BC. One could claim, however, that on the basis of inscriptions of the 2nd and 3rd cent. AD found in the settlement, this was an independent city with elective representatives and other democratic institutions.¹¹

5. Tanais, 1st cent. AD-3rd cent. AD



During the second period of the city's history, which commences right after the destruction wreaked by Polemnon and covers the entire 1st cent. AD, Tanais recovered rather fast. The most distinctive characteristic of this period is the concentration of the settlement around a central spot. Unfortunately we have very little evidence on 1st cent. AD structures, which are confined to a well-preserved complex west of the ruined wall, to the south side of the settlement. The gate of the city was rebuilt, although on a smaller scale, while the streets of the previous period remained in existence. Shortly after the mid-1st cent. BC and until the first decades of the 1st cent. AD the first settlements in the **chora** of Tanais make their appearance, on the southern part of the river Don.¹²

A new period in the city's history commences with the start of the 2nd cent. AD, during which Tanais is rebuilt. The south city walls were repaired, where archaeologists have studied one of its poorly preserved defensive towers. The western city walls of the 2nd cent. AD and three of its defensive towers have been studied in more detail. The poor preservation state of the buildings is interpreted as a result of the city's near-complete destruction in the mid-3rd cent. AD, as well as to the fact that during its later occupation at certain places of the settlement building material from the ruined structures was reused. The buildings of the city's central zone were affected the most.

Archaeological research in Tanais has shown that the population practiced animal husbandry and [agriculture](#), but there are equally strong indications that they also exploited the opportunities afforded by the area's [fishing](#) wealth. Apart from these, inscriptions of the 2nd and 3rd cent. AD inform us that the applied arts flourished in the city, in fact the names of four architects have been preserved.¹³ It is also known that the city's inhabitants worked bone to craft various objects like knife-hilts, arrowheads etc. [Metalworking](#), and especially ironworking, was very widespread in Tanais, while there are indications of glass-working as well.

Between the 2nd and the 3rd cent. AD we can observe a significant rise in the circulation of coins in the city, mainly those minted in the Kingdom of Bosphorus. This coin circulation system had been introduced by the king of Bosphorus himself, Sauromates I (93-123 AD). Most abundant are coins dating to the first half of the 3rd cent. AD, minted by Sauromates II and Rhescuporis III. The silver-plated **stater**s of King Rhescuporis V help us estimate the precise date of the city's destruction in the mid-3rd cent. AD. Roman coins are sometimes found together with the ones from Bosphorus, as well as coins from [Tyras](#) and [Chersonesus](#).

The available epigraphical material reveals that during the Early Christian period the city of Tanais had been incorporated into the Kingdom of Bosphorus. The earliest inscriptions of Tanais as part of the Bosporan Kingdom were issued during the reign of Sauromates I. Almost all the subsequent rulers of Bosphorus are mentioned in the city's inscriptions. The inscriptions also reveal some crucial facts about religious life in Tanais. The city featured various *synodoi* and *thiasoi*, societies worshipping the Highest God, with priests and elective representatives. Furthermore, in the Early Christian period this cult of the Highest God was very widespread not only in Tanais but also in the wider realm of the Bosporan Kingdom.¹⁴

6. Tanais, 4th cent. AD

Following the destructions visited upon the city in the mid-3rd cent. AD, Tanais recovered in the 4th cent., which is seen not in any written testimonies or inscriptions, but solely in the archaeological record. During the 4th cent. the city's fortifications were repaired. The recent discovery of some silver coins minted in Bosphorus in the late 3rd to early 4th cent. AD restores the history of the city for this period, something which until recently had proven impossible. The scarce archaeological evidence at our disposal shows that civic life returns in the mid-4th cent. AD. For the time being it is impossible to give a precise account of why and when the city was abandoned. The existing material from the site of the ancient city and its necropolis¹⁵ leads to the conclusion that habitation in Tanais is finally discontinued in the mid-5th cent. AD.¹⁶

1. Strabo 7.4.5.



2. Алексеева, Е.М. - Кошеленко, Г.А. (eds.), *Античные Государства Северного Причерноморья* (Москва 1984), p. 93;
Böttger, B. - Selov, D.B., *Amphorendipinti aus Tanais* (Pontus Septentrionalis I, Tanais I Moskau 1998), p. 16.
3. Böttger, B. - Selov, D.B., *Amphorendipinti aus Tanais* (Pontus Septentrionalis I, Tanais I, Moskau 1998), pp. 8, 14.
4. At this point we should mention that the attempt to commercially approach the peoples of the north by the Greeks of the Bosporan Kingdom commenced shortly before the foundation of Tanais, in the 5th cent. BC with the establishment of another settlement in the estuary of the river Don, today known among archaeologists as Elizavatovskaya, see Marcenko, K.K. -Zitnikov, V.G. - Kopylov, V.P., *Die Siedlung Elizavetovka am Don* (Pontus Septentrionalis II, Tanais II, Moskau 2000), pp. 30ff.
5. Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E. K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), p. 1047.
6. Strabo 7.4.5 and 11.2.3.
7. Böttger, B. - Selov, D.B., *Amphorendipinti aus Tanais* (Pontus Septentrionalis I, Tanais I, Moskau 1998), pp. 14ff.
8. Алексеева, Е.М. - Кошеленко, Г.А. (eds.), *Античные Государства Северного Причерноморья* (Москва 1984), p. 93.
9. Böttger, B. - Selov, D.B., *Amphorendipinti aus Tanais* (Pontus Septentrionalis I, Tanais I, Moskau 1998), p. 14. See also Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), p. 1051.
10. Böttger, B. - Selov, D.B., *Amphorendipinti aus Tanais Pontus* (Septentrionalis I, Tanais I, Moskau 1998), p. 16. See also Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 1082-90.
11. Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 1054-64.
12. Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp.1064-6.
13. *CIRB* (1965) 1245, 1249, 1250 and 1252.
14. Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 1066-82
15. For more information on the finds from the necropolis of Tanais see Арсеньева, Т.М., Безуглов С. И., Толочко И. В., *Некрополь Танаиса. Раскопки 1981-1995 гг.* (Москва 2001), pp. 7ff.
16. Arsenyeva, T.M., "Tanais", in Grammenos, D.V. - Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 1082-1090.

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	Böttger B., Šelov D. B. , <i>Amphorendipinti aus Tanais</i> , Moskau 1998, Pontus Septentrionalis I, Tanais I
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Webliography :

	Tanais
http://www.theoi.com/Potamos/PotamosTanais.html	

Glossary :

	amphora, the
from the greek words "αμφί"(on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.	
	chora, the
The agricultural land (including villages and land-plots) belonging to a polis. It was bounded with the polis on an administrative and economic basis.	
	stater, the
The term "stater" was used in various areas of the ancient Greek world to define either a standard weight unit or the most important coin in precious metal (gold, silver, electrum) of a numismatic system. The dead weight and accordingly the value of a stater differed from one area to another and it was based on the weight standard effective in the various cities. Therefore, it was necessary each standard to be defined by the authority that issued it (e.g. Aeginetan, Attic, Boeotian, Corinthian).	

Sources

Strabo, *Geographia* 7.4.5, 11.2.3.