

Tauric Chersonesos

Chersonesos was continuously inhabited for nearly two millennia through Greek and Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages. Ancient cities with such a long, uninterrupted history can be counted on one hand. Chersonesos began life as a Greek colony in the fifth century BC and then became a major ally of the Romans in a strategic spot facing the barbarian hordes. During its second thousand years, it was the head of a Byzantine *theme* (military administrative unit) and a center for Christianity. Through it all, Chersonesos maintained a unique degree of autonomy. Greek language and culture, though not exclusive, predominated in its history. The city and its extensive chora and hinterland shared a history with other groups from its beginning: indigenous Taurians,



Figure 1.1
Winter scene of the
Ancient City with the
1935 Basilica against the
Black Sea. Chersonesos
was among the northern-
most of the Greek
colonies. (V. Ganenko)

Figure 1.2
Byzantine-era ruins
overlying those of earlier
periods comprise almost a
third of the ancient city's
territory that has been
excavated thus far.
(C. Williams)



Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Huns, Khazars, Rus', and finally the Genoese. All these cultures left behind conspicuous monuments of their presence. Chersonesos, multi-ethnic in every period, set an excellent example for the modern world of how such a heterogeneous society can not only succeed but also prosper.

Major Events

The story of Chersonesos was hardly uneventful. Its life as a Greek colony and Roman ally constitute a full chapter in this volume. The establishment of democracy on the north coast of the Black Sea in the fifth or early fourth century BC, a century after the first democratic governments in Athens and some other Greek cities, is worthy of particular note. A remarkable inscription on marble in the Museum's Greek Gallery—the Civic Oath of Chersonesos—is one of the few complete documents of early democracy in existence. Ukraine, which became an independent country in 1991 and adopted a democratic constitution in 1994, has an excellent precedent on its own territory.

Few places in Ukraine are as central to the country's history as is Chersonesos. The conversion of Kyivan Rus' to Christianity in the late tenth century AD altered the history of eastern Europe. Chersonesos is the site where Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir), the ruler of Rus', married the Byzantine princess Anna—for which he was both converted and baptized in AD 989. With his conversion came that of all the eastern Slavic peoples. Architects, artists, and priests of Chersonesos were directly involved in creating the splendid Christian capital

city of Kyiv in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries AD. After the Mongol-Turkic conquest of Kyiv (1240), the center of power moved north and Orthodox Christianity spread throughout Russia.

Unique Monuments in the Ancient City and Chora

The economy of the ancient world was, to a large extent, based on agriculture, and much of its population lived out their lives in the countryside. Historians, relying mainly on ancient writers, themselves from elite urban culture, have seriously misrepresented the ancient world as an urban world, and archaeologists, following that precedent until recently, have also focused on cities. Only in the last three decades has a new generation of excavators and survey archaeologists turned to the countryside to discover—not surprisingly—that around many ancient cities, the *chorai*, or agricultural territories, were indeed densely occupied, and not just by slaves or a subaltern labor force but by citizen farmers.

The systematic exploration of an ancient countryside, for the first time ever, began at Chersonesos in the early twentieth century, revealing the complexity of rural life in the ancient Greek world. Ancient farmhouses, some of great size, and the grid system of country roads were excavated because, as the great historian Mikhail Rostovtsev observed, they could reveal much about the social and economic history of Greek civilization. This precocious work went on with few interruptions throughout the twentieth century—anticipating similar efforts in the Mediterranean by half a century. Work on the chora continues today in joint projects involving teams of excavators from the United States, Russia, and Poland, as well as Ukraine.

The importance of the countryside in ancient life is now being recognized at sites throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds. The chora of Metaponto in Magna Grecia (southern Italy) is perhaps the most fully investigated in the West. Still, the chora of Chersonesos is simply the best-preserved monument of its kind in the world.

More than 500 hectares (1,200 acres) of open fields have been preserved out of the 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) of the chora that originally covered the entire Herakleian Peninsula. Here the grid of ancient roads (like that of the city but on a larger scale) and the ruins of about 140 impressive “rural estates” exist to this day. Some of the excavated examples have stone walls standing as high as the first

Figure 1.3
Aerial view of a conserved farmhouse at Site 151 in the chora of Chersonesos.
(C. Williams)





Map 1.1
 Modern political map of
 Ukraine and Black Sea
 littoral states. (J. Trelogan
 after Magocsi, 1985)

floor. Only here can the visitor have the sense of stepping into the rural past, into the lives of farm families of the fourth and third centuries BC. Here, as nowhere else, the ancient winemaking industry can be reconstructed, from the terraced “planting walls” (spaced 2 meters apart and occupying much of the 60 acres of the average estate), the wine presses, and the storage facilities of huge clay vessels with a capacity of 500 to 1,000 liters, to the locally made transport amphorae, the kilns in which they were produced, and the ships that carried them.

Chersonesos has been called a Slavic Pompeii. This description is only a slight exaggeration. None of the ancient structures is still standing to its original height, with the exception of part of the city walls—the largest extant monument of antiquity on the Black Sea. Yet the visitor walking along the main streets (*plateiai*) and the

smaller streets that divide the city into a regular grid has the sensation of being transported back to various time periods. The approach through the southern gate in the city walls leads past the only Greek theater so far discovered in the Black Sea region and the only completely preserved Greek mint anywhere in the world. The mighty walls, which are most fully exposed in the southeastern part of the city, span nearly the whole of the city’s history from the fourth century BC to the fourteenth or fifteenth century AD. They were constantly being repaired and modified as methods of siege warfare changed and in response to the attacks by practically every barbarian (literally “non-Greek speaking”) group whose name has left its mark in history (and some whose names did not). Chersonesos was the ultimate prize and the key to control of the northern Black Sea coast.

Medieval Chersonesos, or Cherson as it came to be known in the sixth century AD, was a city of churches of various sizes and plans and often decorated with rich marble and mosaic flooring. The monumental Byzantine architecture dates predominantly to two periods, the sixth century and the ninth and tenth centuries. What is truly remarkable about



the site is that, like the Italian Pompeii, the city was never built over in the modern era. Though the city was not covered by a volcanic ash, it was almost as effectively preserved. A significant part of Chersonesos was destroyed by fire in the second half of the thirteenth century, after which the city slowly declined. Artifacts were found where they lay at that time, and organic materials such as rope and cloth were preserved because they were partially carbonized. Most other major Byzantine centers lie beneath modern cities. Chersonesos was abandoned for centuries. Fortunately, because Catherine the Great favored the larger harbor to the east, Sevastopol grew up around the remains, leaving the fabric of the ancient city almost intact. As a result, here as nowhere else, the whole pattern of life of a medieval Greek city can be reconstructed—houses, shops, industries, public buildings, chapels, and churches—in their original context. Some stones from Chersonesos, however, because they provided useful building materials, were appropriated for the new eighteenth-century city.

Figure 1.4
Aerial view of Chersonesos
with the newly renovated
St. Volodymyr's Church in
2001. The entrance to
Sevastopol Harbor is in
the distance.
(C. Williams)

History of the Site and Museum

Chersonesos can rightly claim to be the birthplace of archaeology in the Slavic world, especially classical archaeology. Excavations began as early as the third decade of the nineteenth century, a generation before Schliemann's work at Troy. The early excavators were naval officers and passionate amateur archaeologists, as the profession was only just beginning to develop. They included Count and Countess Uvarov, who founded the Moscow Archaeological Society, which, like the Odesa Society of History and Antiquities and the Society of Dilettanti in England, was later transformed into a formal scientific



Figure 1.5
A 1910 photograph of the
Warehouse of Local
Antiquities, the forerunner
of the Preserve's Museum,
with a view of the
reconstruction of
a basilica dated to the
9th–10th centuries.
(NPTC archives)

organization. The tsars funded the Chersonesos excavations, and a small museum—a “Warehouse of Local Antiquities”—was created on the site in 1892. A library, archives, and laboratories followed in the early twentieth century. It can be said, without exaggeration, that every classical archaeologist or ancient historian in Russia or Ukraine, living or deceased, has studied Chersonesos intensively, and many have visited and worked there.

The Collections

Nearly two centuries of excavation at Chersonesos have produced a great number of important discoveries. Many of the finest objects found during the early years now reside in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and in the State Historical Museum in Moscow. Nothing, not even whole mosaic floors, was too big to move. The official policy

after World War II favored keeping the excavated objects in local museums if such existed. The result is that the Chersonesos Museum has one of the finest Ukrainian collections of Greek and Roman antiquities and medieval artifacts, comparable to those in museums of Kyiv and Odesa. Two very special components of the Chersonesos collection stand out.

The group of polychrome grave monuments—stelai, sarcophagi, and architectural elements—is virtually unparalleled in the world. In general, painting, which was greatly admired by ancient authors in the Greek world, has left few traces. The Chersonesos grave monuments, however, were employed in a hastily erected fortification against one of the countless barbarian assaults, thus preserving to an amazing degree the actual pigment, as well as the outlines, of painting. It may be claimed that this discovery, made in 1960–1961, sheds direct light on the secrets of the Greek art of painting even more than the recently uncovered, spectacular Macedonian frescoed tombs.

The other unsurpassed treasures of the Chersonesos Museum include its collection of medieval pottery. The brightly colored vitreous-glazed “sgraffito” (incised) ware, with its original abstract and sometimes whimsical figural designs of saints and monsters, makes an immediate impact. Several important styles, like the “Zeuxippos ware” appear here with great frequency. Chersonesos clearly imported much but also surely had its own local production of quality pottery. Less eye-catching, but of inestimable historical value, is the array of ninth-century pottery found in the main cistern of Chersonesos. This pottery is a unique documentation for a period that was considered a “dark age” elsewhere in Europe.

The medieval collection is truly outstanding in the way that it brings a whole civilization to life. In addition to the superb steatite icons and other works of religious art are the well-designed objects of everyday life: tools, buckles, fibulae, buttons, dice, patterned fabric, jewelry, magistrate seals, bone tools, fine bone boxes, and instruments of toiletry. These items are all housed in spacious galleries of appropriate shape and proportions in a former church of the nineteenth-century monastery.

Hero City

For nearly two millennia Chersonesos was a beacon of civilization in a turbulent world, an outpost that held firm against succeeding waves of barbarian invaders. No other city on the north coast of the Black Sea repelled all of them: Scythians, Goths, Huns, Khazars, Rus', and finally Mongols. The heroism of the many who died defending their homes, freedom, and civilization was relived by Sevastopol in relatively modern times. Writer Lev Tolstoy, who fought here, observed the heroism and the inhumanity of war firsthand. His earliest work, *Sevastopol Stories*, prefigures his later masterpiece, *War and Peace*. The horrors of the Crimean War foreshadowed the creation of the International Red Cross, as Florence



Figure 1.6
Ram-shaped red slip
unguentarium (oil bottle),
3rd century AD, perhaps a
product of Asia Minor.
h 7.7 cm. Strzbeletskiy,
1962. (C. Williams)

Figure 1.7
One plate from a
panorama set of eleven
taken by British
photographer Roger
Fenton in 1855 during
the Crimean War and the
siege of Sevastopol. The
motion blur in the
foreground is due to the
slow shutter speed of early
cameras. (Gernsheim
Collection, Harry Ransom
Humanities Research
Center, The University
of Texas at Austin)



Nightingale nursed wounded and dying British troops, while, in a little known episode, doctors from the United States assisted with Russian casualties in the besieged city. Less than a century later, the inhabitants of Sevastopol withstood the might of Hitler's armies for 247 days. Hardly a single building was left standing in 1944. The "hero city" was rebuilt in record time after World War II in the neoclassical style of its nineteenth-century predecessor.

The almost incredible ability to survive distinguishes Chersonesos from most other ancient centers. Survival into the future, however, is not guaranteed for what is arguably the most important archaeological site on the Black Sea coast. The rapid growth of the city of Sevastopol into the ancient chora, the possibilities of mass tourism to come, the obstacles to management of cultural treasures, the lack of sufficient funding, and the urgently needed conservation of objects and structures exposed to the weather threaten Chersonesos even at this writing. Up to now, the economic growth of newly independent Ukraine has been slow, which places a particular strain on its cultural institutions. Monuments that are

not continuously monitored and conserved eventually collapse and are silently removed from the world's cultural heritage. For the last several years, the National Preserve of Tauric Chersonesos, working in close collaboration with the Institute of Classical Archaeology (ICA) and the Packard Humanities Institute, has been developing and implementing a detailed plan for the preservation and management of both the Ancient City (referring

to the excavated structures now part of the Preserve's open-air museum) and the sites in the chora and environs of Chersonesos, with the encouragement and support of the Ministry of Culture and Arts of Ukraine. To this end, a cultural-scientific nonprofit organization called *Pidtrymka Chersonesu* (Support for Chersonesos)—the first of its kind in Ukraine—was organized in 2001. Chersonesos is on Ukraine's shortlist of monuments to be nominated for UNESCO "World Heritage" status. Foundations in the United States, such as the Brown Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Trust for Mutual Understanding, and the James R. Dougherty, Jr., Foundation, have responded to the urgent need to conserve Chersonesos's unique cultural heritage. This has been underscored by the World Monuments Watch's repeated listing of Chersonesos among the one hundred monuments of world cultural significance in immediate danger from natural and man-made threats.

The Future

The vision for the future includes an archaeological walking itinerary through the ancient chora, or countryside. A recent decision at the highest levels of the Ukrainian government has guaranteed the integrity of the twenty or so parcels (that have remained untouched since ancient times) as parkland. The total Preserve territory, as noted earlier, is about 500 hectares. Preliminary plans for this historic landscape development by the Preserve in collaboration with ICA include a visitors' center and an auxiliary museum of the history of wine making, just outside the largest intact parcel (about 150 hectares). In the chora are eight "rural estates" once engaged in wine production, including Sites 132 and 151. An itinerary of sites, each illustrating a different aspect of rural life, has been planned, with provisions for the best use and the most economical and effective conservation of these sites. A great deal of thought has gone into integrating the extended and scattered parklands into the individual neighborhoods, the urban fabric, and the local economy of Sevastopol.

The Ancient City has its own particular problems regarding conservation and management. It is foremost an archaeological site of the first magnitude. It is also a place with great and special significance for Orthodox Christianity. It is important, both for tourism and school visits, and as a place of recreation for generations of locals. The wrangling between the Church and excavators, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, for the use of the territory revived with the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2000 the Ukrainian government resolved the issue: Chersonesos will remain state property and a "National Preserve" (the only purely archaeological one in the country), and St. Volodymyr's Church may be used by the Orthodox Church on special occasions. This peaceful resolution of a potentially volatile situation is a clear indicator that Ukraine recognizes the great importance that Chersonesos has played, and can continue to play, as a unique attraction of Ukrainian and, indeed, world culture.

Specific steps are being taken to assure the future of Chersonesos. Projects are now under way, funded by generous grants from the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI), to create a digital database of the library and archives. This collection of excavation journals, photographs, plans, and rare publications that go back to the eighteenth century is precious, and its loss would be irreparable. At the same time, work proceeds with PHI support on the



*Figure 1.8
Portion of the Basilica
within a Basilica, a 10th-
century church inside a
larger one of the 6th
century, with mosaic
decorations in situ, 2001.
(C. Williams)*

first modern archaeological research facility in the Preserve since the time of the tsars. Future projects certainly should include conservation of the unique Greek theater and repair of the handsome classical structure that houses the Greek and Roman Galleries. The extant remains of the theater could be left untouched but still become an innovative structure for stage productions, including revivals of ancient drama. As in many museums, some of the finest objects remain in storage because of the lack of adequate display cases or space. The Museum building should be remodeled, and its rare collection should be given a suitable setting.

These projects, among others, would enhance what is already a great cultural complex. They could find assistance from generous international donors or agencies. Ultimately, however, the future of the Preserve depends on the people and the government of Ukraine and on their determination to develop self-sustaining, viable plans for the

Figure 1.9
An architect's rendering
of a proposed eastern
approach to the Preserve
from the 2001 development
plan for the Ancient City.
(C. Holiday)



conservation and intelligent management of the site. This will require cooperation at all levels—neighborhood, city, and state—while involving private citizens and volunteers, a wide-reaching educational campaign, and a carefully planned strategy for local, national, and international tourism. It is a tall order, but the potential rewards for Sevastopol, Ukraine, the world cultural community, and future generations are truly immense.

References

Chtcheglov 1992; Sorochan et al. 2000; Holiday and Maldonado 2001; Romey and Grinenko 2002; Ascherson 2002; Maldonado and Holiday 2003; Carter 2003.