

Tauric Chersonesos is being Destroyed by the Occupying Russian Authorities

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Since 2014, some of the sites of cultural heritage of Ukraine has been under Russian occupation. The occupier caused the greatest damage to the only WHS site in Crimea - the ancient city of the Tauric Chersonesos and its *chora*. The site has been under the protection of UNESCO¹ since 2013, located in the city of Sevastopol in Crimea (Fig.1–2).

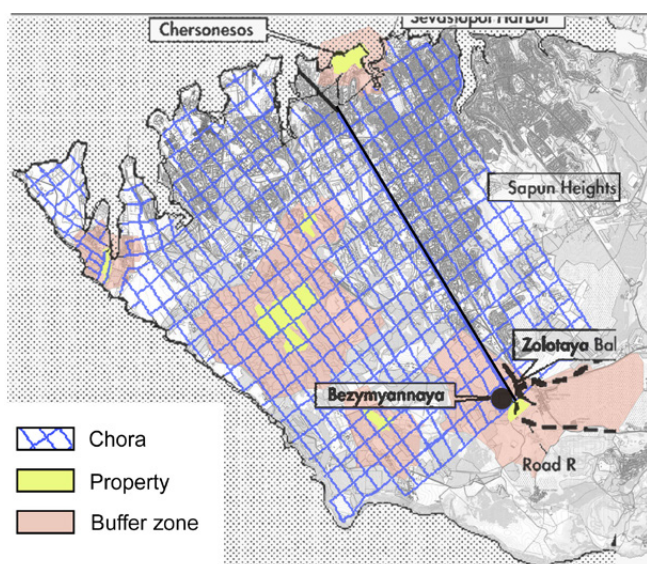


Fig. 1: The Heracleon Peninsula in the South-Western Crimea with the city of the Tauric Chersonesos and its *Chora*

Map: Martin Lenk, with *Chora* by Stephen Tompson (Annual Report, Chersonesos and Metaponto, 2000, p.33)

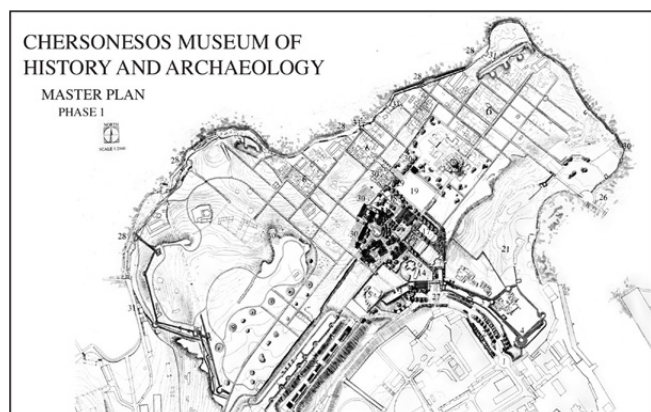


Fig. 2: Plan of the Chersonesos museum from the Annual Report Chersonesos and Metaponto, 2000, p.10.

Plan: Carl Holiday and Alma Maldonado

Tauric Chersonesos was one of the latest ancient Greek colonies, founded in the 5th (according to one version at the end of the 6th) centuries BC on the northern coast of Pontus, and the only Dorian colony. The foundation of Chersonesos around the middle of the 1st millennium BC connected with a number of different factors, the main one being the active trade contacts of the Greeks with the barbarian world of the north of Pontus (Fig.3). The building remains of the city and fortification of the Chersonesos-Kherson and its *chora* (agricultural area) have a unique preservation both for the Northern Black Sea region and for ancient sites in general.

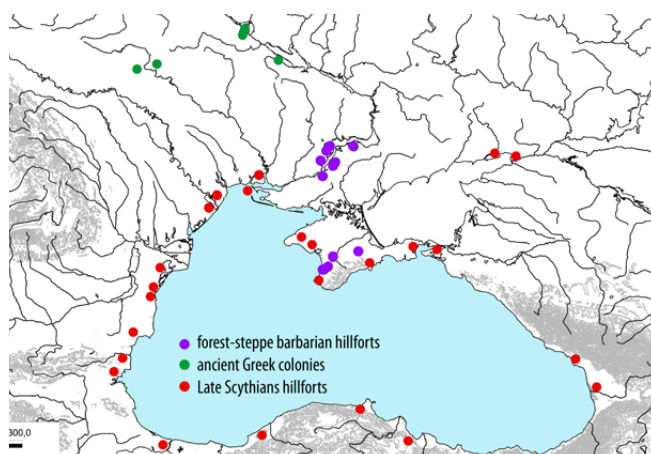


Fig. 3: The Black Sea region with forest-steppe barbarian hillforts, ancient Greek colonies (2) and Late Scythians hillforts (3)

Map: Evelina Kravchenko

The *polis* and the *chora* were designed and built according to a single clearly observed plan, which corresponds to the urban planning concept of Hippodamus of Miletus. In addition, Chersonesos-Kherson throughout its existence was associated with the pervasion of transcultural cult customs and religions. It is connected with evidence of the existence of the cult of the Parthenos or the Virgin, the spread of early Christian ideology even before its official recognition in Rome, the pervasion of Orthodox Christianity (Byzantine observance) after the acceptance and baptism of Kyivan Prince Volodymyr Sviatoslavovych in the process of the acceptance of Rus' and its dynasties into the circle of Byzantine area states.

One of the most important finds in Chersonesos for the world cultural heritage was the Civic Oath of the Chersonesites (IO-

¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1411>

SPE, I², 400-402). This document was created in the 3rd century BC during very hard events. The beginning of the 3rd century BC was marked for Chersonesos by appreciable deprivation of territories in the north and east. Therefore, the appearance of this document could be a rethinking of the status of a citizen by the Chersonesites, increased responsibility for their state. On the other hand, this emphasizes the importance of democratic institutions in Chersonesos, makes it not only unique in terms of the architectural decision of the city, but also a wonderful example of ancient democracy, unique in the quality of the public organization of the *polis*. In fact, all this became the basis for granting Tauric Chersonesos the status of a World Heritage Site (Fig. 4).

In the first few years after the occupation, violations by the occupying power of the use of the WHS related to measures of management – the construction of large observation platforms

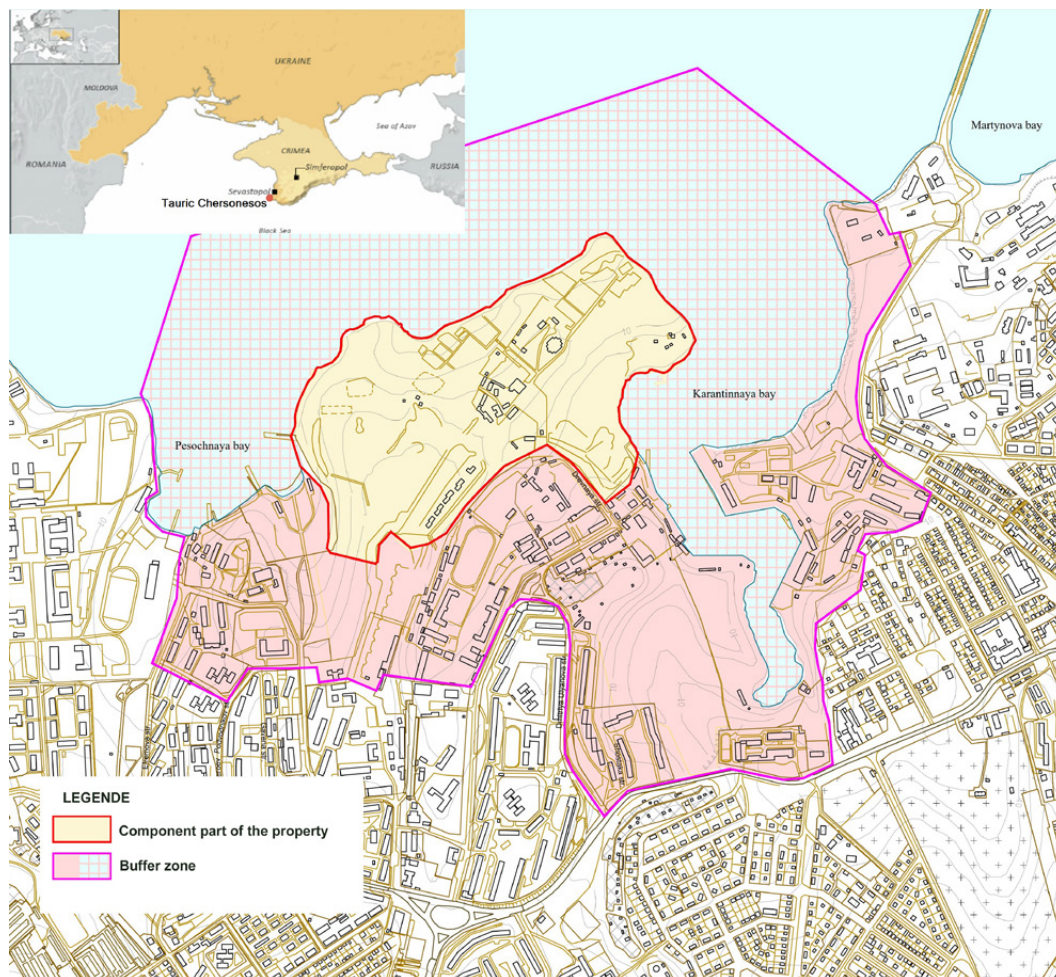


Fig. 4: General Plan of the City of the Tauric Chersonesos (yellow) and buffer zone (pink) by Tymur Bobrovskiy and Larissa Sedikova (Історико-культурні заповідники, 2014).

that distorted the authentic appearance of the site, the laying of pedestrian paths with wooden flooring, which were in no way compatible with the traditions of road covering in Chersonesos, where stone or sea pebbles have always been used, the construction of a new entrance group near the tower of Zenonos, etc. (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: The new entrance group near the tower of Zenonos. Photo: Google Maps, 2021

Further measures of the so-called beautification already affected the Volodymyr's Cathedral, which was handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church by the occupation authorities. It was a complex of works on the arrangement of communications and the territory around St. Volodymyr's Cathedral, which

led to the loss of a part of the exhibition area (Fig. 6), a violation of integral archaeological complexes by digging trenches. In the future, this will lead to the destruction of preserved drawings on the walls of a small cistern covered with a special soil mixture (fig.9), which is located near the St. Volodymyr Cathedral. This "beautification" continues until now, and in the future it is predicted that it will be implemented uncontrolled on the entire territory of the ancient city of Chersonesos.

Directly on the remains of the only preserved Roman citadel in the Northern Black Sea region, an open-air theatre was set up to hold an opera and ballet festival (Fig. 7). Constructions of the stage, decorations,

light and sound equipment, audience rows weighing dozens of tons lay on the stone remains of the oldest part of Chersonesos, covering all the "pre-Christian" building rests of the city.

The most barbaric crime that could be invented at an archaeological site is its demolition and construction, which happened



Fig. 6: The City of Tauric Chersonesos with the area of the St. Volodymyr cathedral (left center, behind the wall).

Photo: Chris Williams, 2001



Fig. 7: The open-air theatre in the remains of the Roman citadel.

Photo: From the author's collection, 2023

as a result of the construction of the New Chersonese Archaeological Park (Fig. 8). Construction took place on the site of the ancient suburb of Chersonesos which was discovered and explored in 2010–2013, in the southern part of the site. As a result, more than 80,000 square meters of WHS were destroyed. The construction works destroyed the cultural layer, which in some places reached more than 10 meters, the remains of an ancient temple, the city necropolis with unique burial and memorial structures, layers of ash and litter, the remains of suburban complexes of the WHS together with ceramic workshops (*ceramicos*).

Fig. 8: Map of Sevastopol (2024) with National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos (between the Pischna and Karantynna bays) and the area of the so-called Archaeological Park of the New Chersonesos in the buffer zone.

Map: Google / Martin Lenk



The area of these complexes is part of the Tauric Chersonesos site. It was a territory of a Russian military base before 2014, and just part of this territory is the area of the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos excavated in 2010–2013. In the map of the UNESCO WHS this territory is in the buffer zone (see Fig. 4).

All these works were sanctioned by Russian archaeologists who supposedly conducted research there in an expedition of the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The expedition was headed by Sergey Solov'yov. Specialists of the State Hermitage, the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russian universities, and the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos are involved in this. In addition to the fact that the general appearance of the site was disturbed, which led to the distortion of the ancient landscape, tens of thousands of finds excavated by soil works from destroyed suburban complexes were removed from Crimea, other tens of thousands ended up in the modern landfills of Sevastopol, where they were taken by dump trucks from the construction zone. Some of them were picked up from these dumps by local people both for personal storage and for sale on the black market. Thus, soon we will be able to see things from Chersonesos on online auctions.

The executor of these works and the general contractor is the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, the management and financing of the works is carried out by the "My History" fund of the Patriarchal Council for Culture of the Russian Or-

thodox Church with the direct participation of Simferopol and Crimea Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov). The museum-preserve (the Russian administration of the WHS) itself, as a new structure created on the site of Tauric Chersonesos, headed by the former director of the St. Petersburg Waterworks Elena Morozova, does not interfere with the construction work and is going to soon move all its departments to the buildings of the New Chersonesos Archaeological Park.

In January 2024, the occupation authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church announced the so-called renewal of the monastery in the buildings of the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos (Fig. 9).²



Fig. 9: Consecration of the St. Volodymyr male monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church on the territory of the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos.

Photo: From the author's collection, January 2024

This means that the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos will be evicted from all its buildings to newly built ones on the destroyed part of the site.

Actually, the authentic museum was turned into a monastery³, the most valuable things were exported to the Russian Federation⁴, the evidence and building remains of the ancient democratic *polis* were closed for exhibition, they are under the open air theatre⁵. Instead, a fake was created - the so-called New Chersonesos, which will shine with gold and new paint, with smog green lawns, fountains, Chinese bridges and a tem-

ple with a dome that will open like in James Bond movies (Fig. 10–12).



Figs 10–12: Buildings and streets of the archaeological park of the New Chersonesos.

Photos from the author's collection, 2022–2024

² The St. Volodymyr monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church was created on the area of the Tauric Chersonesos site in the middle of the XIX century and functioned till 1924, when it was closed by the Communist power of the RSFSR. The buildings of the monastery were handed to the museum of Chersonesos. The St. Volodymyr cathedral was destroyed in World War II and reconstructed by the Kyiv community in its own fundaments at the beginning of the 2000s. The monastery was not built until 2024.

³ https://zaxid.net/herones_nerizdyvana_istoriya_n1577581?fbclid=IwZXh0bGhZW0CMTEAAR3k2J-n5XhNMPGS81F_JrbswpM05Or0vd2oi94S9MO-5s9eVws2OR3ZZct4_aem_AasDtY8c5HUf9gzPGf7h8c7jqkiWH45vVOD-qsv-1Orgm1vQNerDHC-R3OVcMeCJkPPLVOqae5iTLsBnQHb-S62FV

⁴ <http://vgosau.kiev.ua/novyny/arkheolohichna-spadshyna-na-okupovanykh-terytoriyakh/1351-vyvezennia-arkh-tsinnostei-kherones?fbclid=IwAR3WiiTLQ7VDEkknQ6bzt7Jut5XF6wIw92CSM59GI-9JrYVSLzaFeAMwJHvA>

⁵ https://zaxid.net/yak_rosiyani_znishchuyut_herones_tavriyskiy_n1568258

How does this correlate with Russian legislation? The fact is that after the occupation, the authorities of the Russian Federation refused to recognize the Ukrainian documentation for the WHS and accepted by UNESCO for registration. Instead, new documentation was created for the site of Tauric Chersonesos, and a number of examinations were conducted to approve such works on the site. Acts of conducting “expert” work were signed by a number of archaeologists known outside Crimea - Yuriy Zaitsev, Igor Khrapunov, and the archaeological research that became the basis for these acts was carried out by Ludmila Kovalevska and Emil Seydaliev.

Thus, not only the laws of Ukraine on the protection and management of archaeological and cultural heritage were violated, but also international documents, in particular the management plan of the site, the requirements of UNESCO regarding the coordination of all landscape transformations around the site and work on the site and buffer zone.

What about the restoration? Russia has not changed its approach to the restoration of cultural heritage objects since the time of the USSR. They consisted not so much in preserving the object in its historical authentic form, but in giving the object an attractive appearance. Thus, the Soviet restoration allowed the complete reconstruction of the cultural heritage object. As it happened with Gostynnyi Dvir in Kyiv, after which the building took on a different appearance and almost completely lost its authenticity, which eventually led to its current state of ruin. Modern world requirements for restoration are based on measures to preserve the site and minimize any changes to it. Russian requirements for this process remained at the level of the 80s of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

In Chersonesos, after the destruction of the suburb during the construction of the New Chersonese Archaeological Park, the occupiers decided to restore some of the unique archaeological sites, which miraculously did not die under the bucket of the excavator, in a new place. In particular, we are talking about the ancient suburb sanctuary – the *heroon* – and the temple on *antus* (Fig. 13–14). And as Sergey Solovyov, the direct leader

of these so-called archaeological researches, noted in a recent interview with Russian propagandists, the Russians rebuilt these objects even better than the Greeks. Actually, this statement contains all the tragedy of the situation and of Russian culture as a whole: Russians for some reason are sure that everything done before or without them is bad.

Despite the fact that during the construction of the archaeological park of New Chersonesos, millions of archaeological objects were obtained that required laboratory processing and restoration, not a single new restoration workshop was created in Crimea by the occupation authorities. Most of the objects were sent to Moscow and St. Petersburg for restoration, their status is unknown. The rest was restored and conserved in Crimean workshops, the best of which were built and equipped in the National Preserve of Tauric Chersonesos until 2014, in particular, the Packard Laboratory, which was created at the expense of the Packard Humanitarian Foundation (USA) within the scope of an international project of the Institute of Classical Archaeology of the University of Texas, headed by Prof. J. Carter.

All these violations, which led to catastrophic consequences for the World Heritage site, became possible due to non-compliance with the international legislation ratified by the Russian Federation on the protection of cultural property, in particular during armed conflict (the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property during Armed Conflict, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, etc.), the archaism of the conceptual foundations of the Russian legislation itself, as well as the exceptionally high level of corruption in the Russian Federation, when no laws affect the personal whims of the top leadership of the state and its entourage.

The recent situation around the Tauric Chersonesos WHS, with military bases located near the site,⁶ is dangerous and assumes to recommend the inscription of this site to the List in Danger, so as to ask question about modernization the procedures of UNESCO monitoring mission and changes the system of monitoring according hi-tech decisions. The activities of the Russian Federation in the Tauric Chersonesos devaluated the protection of cultural heritage and has put this state party outside this process.



Fig.s 13 and 14: The Russian archaeological team near the excavation of *heroon* and temple of *antus* and deconstruction of these objects in a new square of so-called archaeological park of the New Chersonesos. Photos: From the author's collection, 2022-2024

6 https://zaxid.net/na_teritoriji_hersonesa_tavriyskogo_okupanti_buduyut_vyskoviy_navchalniy_tsentr_n1571700?fbclid=IwZxh0bgNhZW0CMTEAR1bl-clFh2m6I9ZK76kf5nj-1zOnaO93AAAEv7eejmMsmMPsHZZprbpG444_aem_AasTC6xFYg3VUWaQvll3pgN96o61VeD6hd30-PEPmpt5LUvGe8O2crUtMKPsMd9E-p-k4pWYDps-vUEmVtT126X9