

The 'Crypt on N. I. Tur's Land' in Early Byzantine Chersonesos: Cherson as a Monument of the Formation of the Church in the City

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Chersonesos-Cherson is a Byzantine centre on the border between the Byzantine civilisation and the 'barbarian world'. The ancient city is located outside the modern city, and regular archaeological excavations have been held for more than a hundred years. One of the most interesting monuments of the period of the transformation of the Late Antique town into the medieval city (the fourth to the early fifth century) is the 'Crypt on N. I. Tur's Land'. The catacomb was planned as a typical burial construction. The study of this monument, its architecture and wall paintings has shown that it was rebuilt into a theophanic *martyrium* where church services associated with the memory of the early history of Christianity in the city took place. It became a monument of the activities of St Basil, the first bishop of Chersonesos.

Chersonèse/Cherson est un centre byzantin à la frontière de la civilisation byzantine et du « monde barbare ». L'ancienne ville, située en dehors de la zone urbaine moderne, fait l'objet de fouilles archéologiques depuis plus de cent ans. L'un des monuments de l'époque de la transformation de la ville tardo-tardive en ville médiévale (IV^e siècle – début du V^e siècle) est la « Crypte sur la terre de N. I. Tur ». Cette catacombe a été conçue comme un édifice funéraire typique. L'étude du monument, de son architecture et de ses peintures murales a démontré qu'il a été reconstruit en *martyrium* théophanique où se tenaient des services religieux liés à la mémoire des premiers temps du christianisme dans la cité. Il est ainsi devenu un monument dédié aux activités de saint Basile, le premier évêque de Chersonèse.

Chersonesos/Cherson gilt als ein byzantinisches Zentrum an der Grenze zwischen Byzantium und der Welt der „Barbaren“. Die antike Stadt befindet sich außerhalb der modernen Bebauung, wo seit über hundert Jahren regelmäßig Ausgrabungen durchgeführt werden. Eines der interessantesten Denkmäler aus der Zeit der Umwandlung der antiken Stadt während des 4. und 5. Jhs. ist die „Krypta auf dem Boden von N. I. Tur“. Die Katakomben wurde als eine typische Grabkonstruktion geplant. Die Untersuchung des Denkmals, seiner Architektur und Wandmalereien zeigte, dass es in ein theophanisches *Martyrium* umgebaut wurde, wo Gottesdienste zelebriert wurden, die an die frühe Geschichte des Christentums in der Stadt erinnerten. Es wurde zu einer Erinnerungsstätte für das Wirken des heiligen Basilus, des ersten Bischofs von Cherson.

Chersoneso – Cherson, è un centro bizantino al confine tra la civiltà bizantina e il «mondo dei barbari». L'antica città si trova al di fuori della città moderna e per questo gli scavi archeologici vi sono stati condotti già per oltre cento anni. Uno dei monumenti più interessanti dell'epoca della trasformazione della città tardo antica in quella medievale (IV – inizio del V secolo) è la «cripta sul terreno di N.I. Tur». La cataomba fu progettata come una tipica costruzione funeraria. Lo studio del monumento, della sua architettura e delle pitture murali ha dimostrato che esso è stato ricostruito come *martyrium* teofanico, dove si svolgevano le celebrazioni liturgiche legate alla memoria della storia precoce del cristianesimo nella città. Esso divenne un monumento alle attività di San Basilio, il primo vescovo di Chersoneso.

One of the significant problems associated with studying the formation of Early Christian art is the insufficient amount of research on Early Christian centres. Many Late Antique centres are not available for research. This problem has been mentioned in the literature many times.¹ As a result, the monuments of the Northern Black Sea region are sites of particular interest. A special place among them is occupied by Chersonesos/Cherson, a local centre on the border between the Byzantine civilization and the 'barbarian world'. Its uniqueness is underlined by the fact that the site is located outside the modern city, unlike many other Late Antique and Byzantine centres such as Thessaloniki, Athens, Ravenna or Constantinople/Istanbul. Regular archaeological excavations have already been conducted on the territory of the ancient city for more than a hundred years. There is a unique scientific complex at the site that includes laboratories, storage units and a museum – a rare circumstance for Byzantine monuments around the world. As a result, a great quantity of material, which needs to be studied and interpreted, has been accumulated (fig. 1).

¹Romanchuk 2007, pp. 133–145.

A series of unique works of art of Late Antiquity and the Early Christian period was discovered at the archaeological site and in the nearby territory. They are comparable to the Roman catacombs and the Dura-Europos wall-paintings. Research into them makes it possible to see the process of formation of the Early Christian artistic tradition and the ideological transformation during the period of the evolution of the Late Antique town into the medieval city. Among these monuments, first place is taken by the Chersonesos crypts with wall paintings and the fragments of frescoes and mosaic floor of the early 'Basilica of 1935'.² The monument which is mentioned in the literature as the 'crypt on N. I. Tur's land' stands out among the painted crypts of Chersonesos. Discussion about the monuments has already been held for a long time, and one of the most disputed issues is the dating.

The famous M. I. Rostovtsev, who was also a specialist in Late Antiquity, dated the monuments to the second half of the fourth and the early fifth century. The basis for this dating

²Fomin 2014, pp. 299–390.

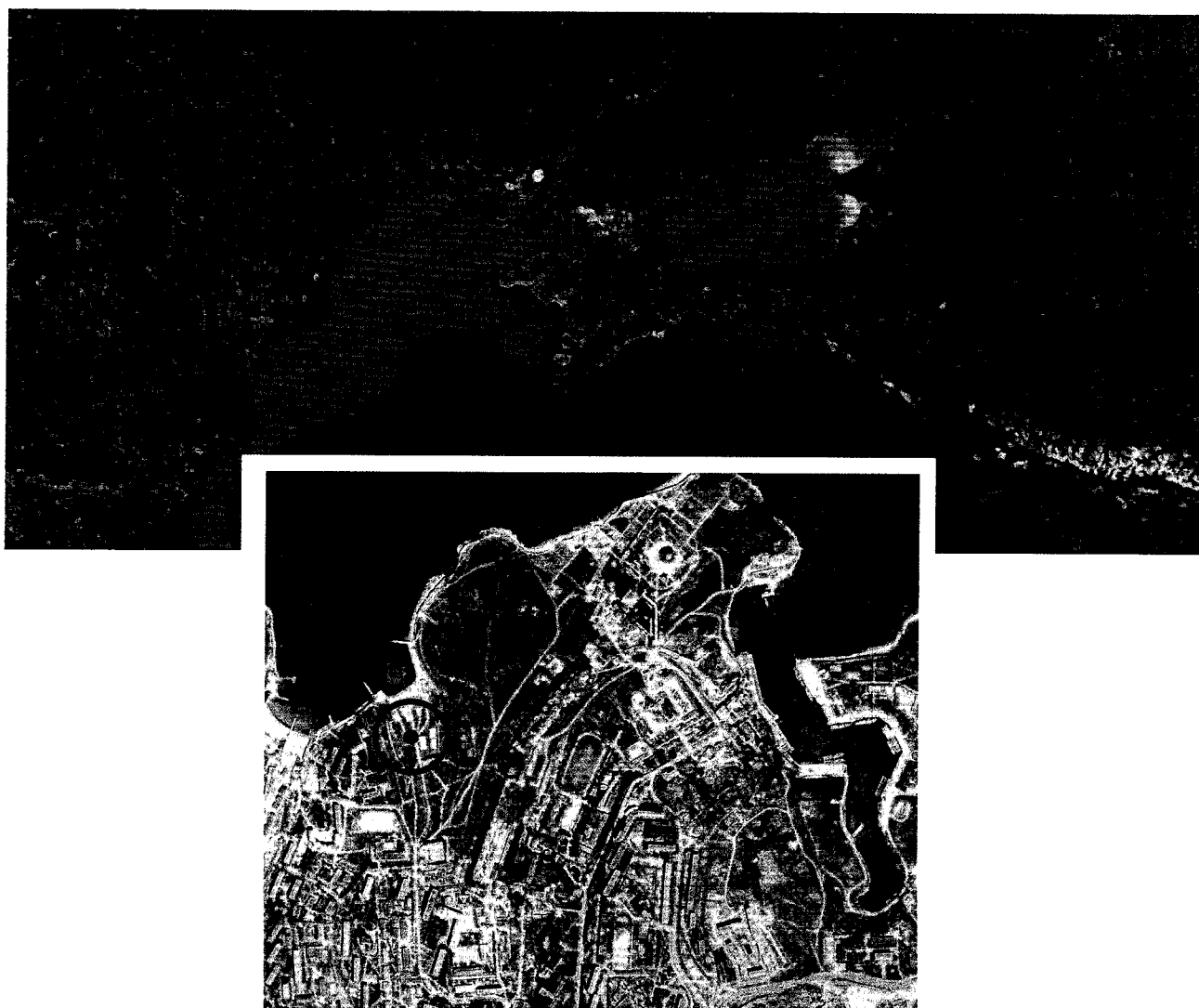


Fig. 1. Location of Chersonesos/Cherson and the 'crypt on N. I. Tur's land'.

was numismatic material.³ Later, some modern scholars, including P. D. Diatropov,⁴ L. G. Khrushkova⁵ and I. A. Zavadskaya⁶ supported this conclusion. S. B. Sorochan also placed significant emphasis on the group of crypts, with several publications that were dedicated to this particular catacomb and that refer to its creation before the end of the fourth century.⁷ A. E. Philippov dates the crypts to the third to fourth century.⁸ V. M. Zubar paid much attention to the monuments in his works and offered a different interpretation. According to his conclusions, the crypts were painted in the fifth to sixth century.⁹

The results of archaeological research on two crypts which were discovered in 2006 put an end to this dispute. Analysis of archaeological finds and the wall-painting system allowed them to be dated to the middle of the fourth century.¹⁰ The paintings of the 'crypt on N. I. Tur's land' are identical in their colour range, composition, style and technique of execution.

The monument has been repeatedly mentioned in scientific works devoted to research on Late Antique art in Chersonesos. It was published for the first time in the fundamental work by M. I. Rostovtsev.¹¹ The author gives a description, plans and sketches of murals, and makes an attempt to interpret them (fig. 2, 3, 4). Unfortunately, the location of the crypt is lost; this publication is the only documentary description. Subsequent researchers have thus used the materials of M. I. Rostovtsev.

The catacomb was discovered in 1894 but was excavated only in 1912. Initially, it was planned as a typical burial construction (2.48–2.13 x 2.79 x 1.68–1.60 m). In the left and back walls under the ceiling, niches were located. During construction, the bench was made (fig. 7). Later, the inner area was significantly reconstructed. The loculeus, located opposite the entrance, was deepened to the level of the floor. Approximately in the middle of the loculeus, a small protrusion and a small niche behind it were made. In the front wall, the passage was made. As a result of the restructuring, a small area similar to a church apse was built. Its decoration is of special interest (fig. 8).

As M. I. Rostovtsev wrote, on the lowest part of the wall the stripes of a deformed meander were depicted. The wall-painting could be an imitation of architectural details; the wall on the left of the niche and at the bottom of the niche, i.e. the altar barrier, were decorated with something similar to the grid ornament typical for antique balustrades and Early Christian altar barriers.¹²

The 'apse' architecture has some distinctive features. During the reconstruction, a stone ledge was left in the centre of the apse; above it, a small niche was made (fig. 5). It can be assumed that they were used as an altar for liturgy, as similar early liturgical constructions were widespread. They are known in the cave churches of Cappadocia and the Mountainous Crimea, in the regions of the Danube and the Dniester, and are described by Y. Y. Shevchenko.¹³

The wall-painting system could indirectly confirm this assumption. The space was outlined by red lines along its perimeter. Above the ledge, two peacocks facing each other hold the semicircle of a garland. Above the garland and peacocks, there are 'flowers' consisting of four 'heart-shaped' petals and 'green tendrils between them'.¹⁴ The same flower appears in the centre of the garland (fig. 5). Similar images can be found on other monuments of Early Christian art, for example, in the decorative painting of Ravenna, frescoes of the Roman catacombs, on Coptic textiles and Early Christian sarcophagi; they can also be found in other crypts at Chersonesos (fig. 4, 5). Y. Matveeva has suggested that these flowers are symbols of Eucharistic bread.¹⁵ Thus, the entire painting system, which includes Early Christian symbols (peacocks – a symbol of eternal life; laurel garland or wreath – a symbol of victory, i.e. victory over death; flowers – a symbol of Eucharistic bread) indicates the liturgical purpose of the ledge.

As in most of the other crypts of Chersonesos, two diagonal garlands and a wreath with a Chi Ro in its centre were drawn on the ceiling.¹⁶ The system of wall-painting on the right wall has become the subject of discussion.¹⁷ On the left part of the wall were remnants of the image of a plant with fruits or flowers (fig. 3). Some experts have considered it to depict grapes. At some distance from the bush was depicted a woman in a long tunic. Her right arm is bent, with the forearm directed to the right; the left arm is not preserved. One foot stands frontally, and the position of the second foot is not preserved.¹⁸ To the right of the woman, the figure of a man was placed. The figure is dressed 'almost in the same way' as the male figure from the 'Uvarov crypt' (fig. 6).¹⁹ The man's arms are bent at the elbows; forearms and feet are directed to the right. The figures' wrists, shoulders, and heads are not preserved, but by analogy with the other monuments, it can be assumed that they were placed frontally. The gesture of the forearms and the position of the feet transmit the direction of movement. The figures 'are not resting on the surface', but the depiction of the ground was rendered by wavy brown lines.²⁰

³Rostovtsev 1914, pp. 451, 457, 462, 469 and 503–507.

⁴Diatropov 2002, pp. 34–36.

⁵Khrushkova 2004, pp. 168–194.

⁶Zavadskaya 2005, pp. 258–288.

⁷Sorochan 2006, pp. 140–154.

⁸Philippov 2009, p. 315.

⁹Zubar, Khvorostyany 2000, pp. 144–154; Zubar 1988, p. 12; 1999, pp. 300–311.

¹⁰Fomin 2014, pp. 299–390.

¹¹Rostovtsev 1913; 1914.

¹²Rostovtsev 1914, p. 475.

¹³Shevchenko 2011, pp. 55–147.

¹⁴Rostovtsev 1914, p. 469.

¹⁵Matveeva 2016, pp. 66–70.

¹⁶Rostovtsev 1914, p. 478.

¹⁷Rostovtsev 1914, pp. 473–474; Zubar 1991, p. 22; Sorochan 2005, pp. 1069–1070; Fomin 2007, pp. 164–165.

¹⁸Rostovtsev 1914, p. 455.

¹⁹Rostovtsev 1914, p. 433; Fomin 2014, pp. 325–327, fig. 7–10.

²⁰Rostovtsev 1914, p. 455.

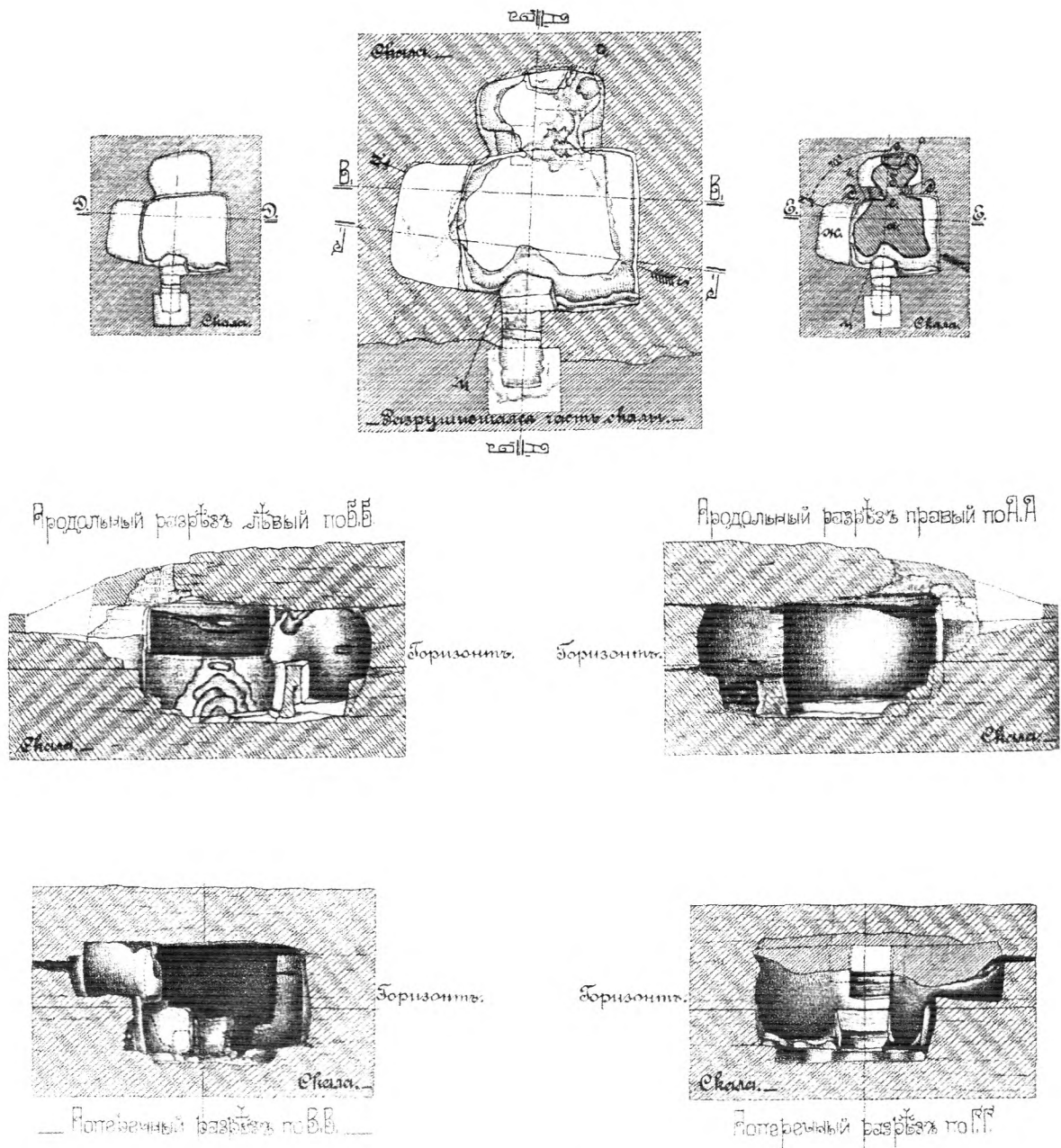


Fig. 2. Plan of the ‘crypt on N. I. Tur’s land’ (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).

To the right of the figures was situated a depiction of the city walls with gates and towers. To the right of it, plants (trees, reeds?) were depicted with black lines. Researchers interpret the remnants of wall-painting under the image of the city variously (fig. 3).

On the left side of the back wall, a male figure was drawn, but only images of his feet have survived (fig. 4). Thus, after reconstruction, the inner space of the burial complex becomes similar to the apse with altar and altar barrier. All those changes make it possible to assume that the crypt was used for church services, including liturgy. A special attitude of the citizens towards the crypt and its transformation into a church leads to the conclusion that the construction played a special role in the religious life of the first Christians of Chersonesos. Probably the crypt became a martyrion.

The history of the Christianisation of Late Antique Chersonesos is known from the hagiographic texts ‘The Lives of Holy Bishops of Cherson’.²¹ The original text that was the basis of the known variations was written probably in the fifth to sixth century by a local man who was familiar with the history of the church of Chersonesos/Cherson. The original text contained an accurate description and recognisable place names in the city. The most interesting text for the interpretation of the crypt is a story about the saint Bishop Basil. In the text of ‘The Lives of Holy Bishops of Cherson’, a story tells that the saint resurrected the son of one of the city rulers. The hagiographic source indicates that the boy had been buried in a crypt not far from the city. His parents found St Basil, who had been

²¹ Mogarichev *et al.*, 2012.

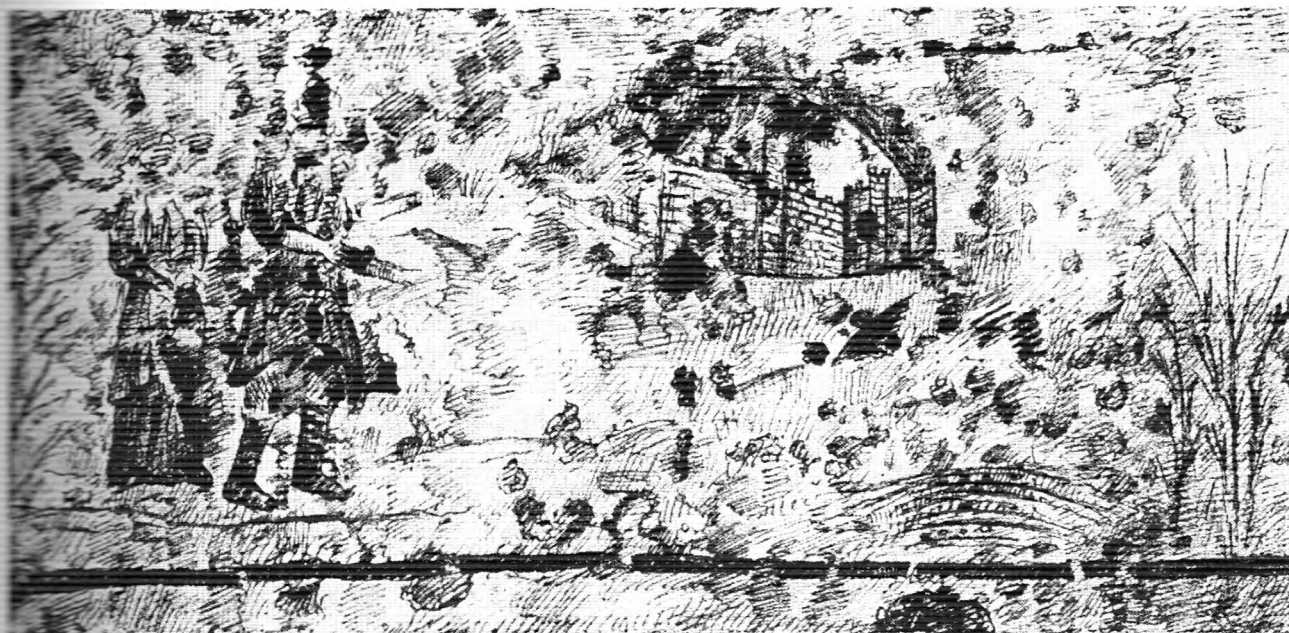


Fig. 3. The system of wall-painting of the right wall: 'man and woman walking in the city' (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).

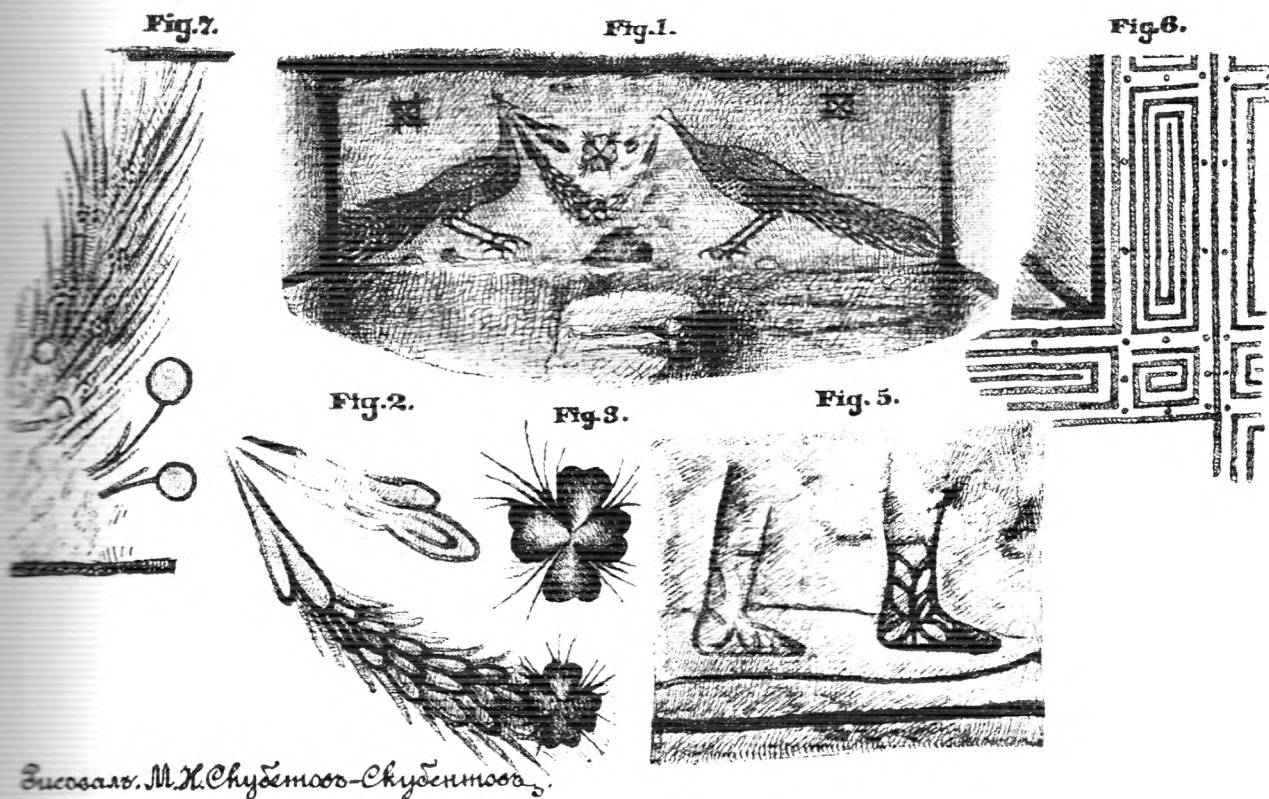


Fig. 4. The elements of the crypt painting (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).

hiding in the city, and asked him to resurrect their son. Basil washed the body 'as if christening him' and the boy was resurrected in response to his prayer. As a result of the miracle, the child's parents and their relatives were baptised, but in spite of this, St Basil was murdered.

In the city, there were many monuments associated with the memory of the first bishop. Above his grave, a church was

built. Later, this place became the centre of the complex of the Western Basilica. In the sixth century, the cross-shaped church-martyrium was built on the site of his death. The place where the miracle happened was especially revered, and the crypt could be a theophanic martyrium. Analysis of the wall-painting of the crypt-martyrium may indirectly confirm this assumption. It can be assumed that the murals are illustrations of the text 'The Lives of Holy Bishops

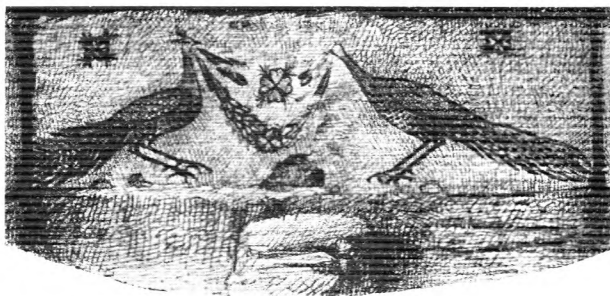


Fig. 5. The painting of the ‘apses’ (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).



Fig. 6. The elements of the ‘Uvarov crypt’ painting (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CVI).

of Cherson’. The man and the woman who are moving towards the city could possibly be the parents of the child, and the man who is coming out of the town, the saint Bishop Basil. The city is probably a symbolic depiction of Chersonesos.

Thus, the site which is known as the ‘crypt on N. I. Tur’s land’ could initially have been a tomb owned by members of the local aristocracy. After the event that is described in ‘The Lives of Holy Bishops of Cherson’, the crypt became a particularly venerated site that was associated with the memory of St Basil, the first bishop of Chersonesos. At the end of the fourth century, the crypt was rebuilt into a theophanic martyrion where church services were situated, associated with the memory of the early history of Christianity in the city.

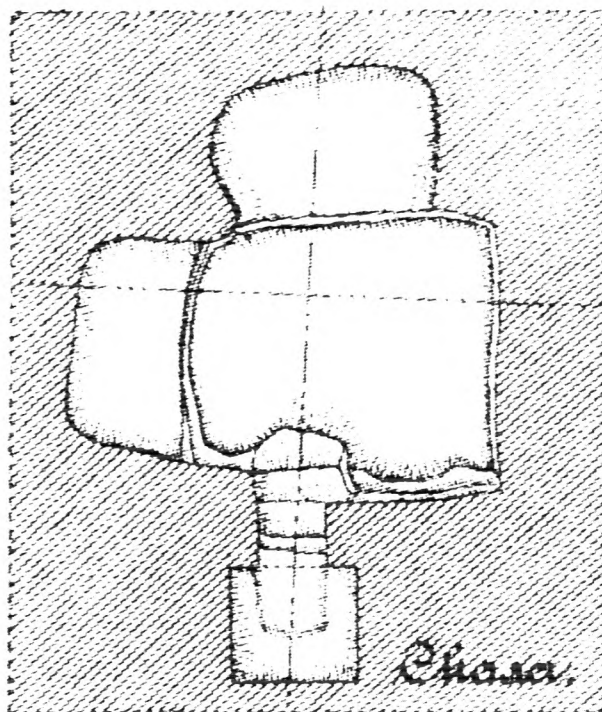


Fig. 7. The plan of the crypt before reconstruction (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).

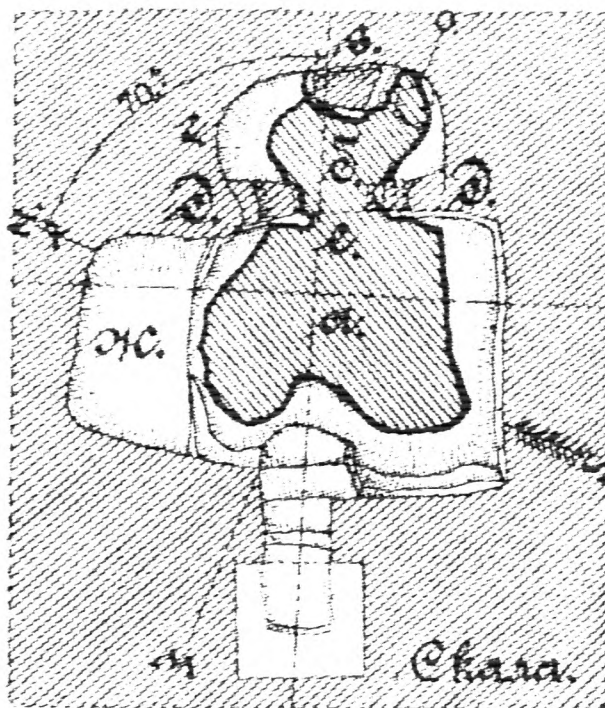


Fig. 8. The plan of the crypt after reconstruction (Rostovtsev 1914, tab. CXVI).

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Abbreviation:

МАИАСК = *Материалы по археологии и истории античного и средневекового Крыма – Materials in Archaeology and History of Ancient and Medieval Crimea.*

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