

REVIEWS



**Death, burial and cemeteries in early medieval Chersonese-Cherson:
A new book about funeral traditions and ceremony in a provincial
Byzantine town**

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огребальная традиция и обряд в византийском Херсоне (IV-X вв.)
[Funeral Traditions and Ceremonies in the Byzantine Cherson (Fourth to
Tenth Centuries)]. – X. : Коллегиум, 2011. – 290 с.

This new book about the Byzantine Chersonese–Cherson in the Crimea was prepared on the basis of M. V. Fomin's dissertation, which was submitted for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences at Karazin Kharkiv National University on 12 May, 2010 [9; 2, с. 542-545; 3, с. 118-119]. The work that has brought to scholarly attention the funeral traditions in Chersonese–Cherson in the fourth to tenth centuries, as the M. V. Fomin notes in his historiographical overview (p. 26), was S. B. Sorochan's article «Tomb-Building in the Byzantine Cherson (VI-X c.)» [8]. This article was also included in the collective monograph on the history of the early medieval Byzantine Cherson, in the part on «Death in Cherson» [7, с. 1031-1095].

Arguing for the topicality of his research, M. V. Fomin rightly stresses the fact that during «the whole history of scientific excavation, work has focused primarily on the ancient necropolis, while the medieval cemetery remained without proper attention» (p. 6). Meanwhile, research on «the funeral rites and traditions, their development, structure, transformation and spatial location» can «give an opportunity to trace the fundamentally important changes in the life of the city during the transition from the late antiquity to the Middle Ages... [and] the religious, social, political, economic, ethnic developments that occurred within a specific Romaioi center» (p. 5).

In the first section of the book the author characterizes the historiography of the problem, its source base, methodology, and methods (p. 10-37). His survey of the historiography (p. 11-29) confirms the researchers' privileging of the late antique and early Christian materials. A large majority of research does not go beyond the period between the fourth and sixth centuries. Even in this chronological framework, first, scholars do not cover the entire mass of funeral monuments and, second, funeral remains are considered mainly in the context of a few traditional controversies: about the time of the emergence of the early Christian community, the dating of the hand-painted crypts, etc. Seventh to tenth-century materials were studied, besides the already mentioned S. B. Sorochan, by A. L. Jacobson [10], whose findings (especially regarding this subject) are significantly outdated and need revision.

It should be noted that in his overview M. V. Fomin does not mention the important publication *Crimea, North-East Black Sea Region and Transcaucasia in Middle Ages: Fourth to Thirteenth Centuries* [5] in the fundamental series *Archeology from Ancient Times to the Middle Ages* in 20 volumes, in which sections about Cherson, including the character of the funerals [5, с. 24, 25, 51] were prepared by A. I. Aybabin. One would also do well to consider the dissertation of O. V. Latysheva, prepared under the supervision of S. B. Sorochan and defended on 29 May, 2009 [6; 4, с. 83-85; see also: 1]. Subsection 4.5 of that work deals with issues related to funerals and 5.4 discusses the features of the memorium and martyrism cults in Cherson. However, the points that O. V. Latysheva raises only in passing because they fall outside her main subject M. V. Fomin considers in depth, employing the whole range of currently available sources.

In his overview of the sources, Fomin focuses primarily on the artifacts and data of numismatics, written sources (mostly hagiographic), epigraphy, and anthropological materials (p. 29–37).

In the second chapter, «The Funerary Tradition and Funerals in the Early Christian Chersonese (Fourth and Fifth Centuries)» (p. 38-120) M. V. Fomin analyzes first of all the emergence of the early Christian cemetery and the formation of Christian funerary customs and traditions. The Christian cemetery appeared on the same territory as the late-antique necropolis and included three cemeteries – Western, Southern, and South-Eastern. They used the same types of funerary constructions as before: collective crypts and separate individual graves of different types. Fomin's calculations on the basis of the generalization of the currently known archeological materials are significant. The most popular were regular soil graves – 82 % of the general number of graves. 15 % were crypts, and about 2,5 % were graves with a side-cave at the bottom. Fomin's analysis of the grave goods is also important (p. 58, 78–82). Of interest is his conclusion about the loss of their significance due to the expansion of the tradition of collective burials at the churches to which the deceased belonged (p. 78). Most probably, the disappearance of grave stones can be related to the Christian views of death as a person's birth to the «life eternal» (p. 82-87), widespread among the citizens of Chersonese, which the author considers in the next section.

The most important are the sections 4 and 5, which deal with the formation of the sacral space of the early Christian necropolis at Chersonese and the establishment and expansion of early Christian funerary traditions during the fourth and fifth century (p. 87–120).

Finally, the most significant part of the book from the scholarly point of view is the third chapter, «The Funerary Tradition and Graves in Byzantine Cherson in the Sixth to Tenth Centuries» (p. 121–202). This period rarely attracts the researchers' attention and, while the late antique and early Christian parts of the urban necropolis formation have been intensively studied, the issues related to the development of funerary traditions and the functioning of the urban cemeteries already after the expansion, victory and strengthening of Christianity in Cherson have been almost entirely neglected. It is no wonder that the archeology of burials is barely mentioned in the archeological essays on the eighth to ninth-century Cherson, as well as on the period from the tenth to the first half of the thirteenth centuries, in the already cited work *Crimea, North-East Black Sea Region and Transcaucasia in the Middle Ages: Fourth to Thirteenth Centuries* [see: 5, c. 64–67, 82–86].

One of the most widespread burial constructions during those periods were still crypts, both those that had been in use since the late antique era and newly constructed ones. Some of them contained the remnants of tens and even thousands of bodies. The grave goods became substantially poorer, even though up to and including the sixth century burials contained items of everyday life, the simplest jewelry, and glass balzamaries. Of importance is the author's statement about the existence of a separate part of the urban cemetery to the south from the suburban cross-shaped Church of the Virgin Mary in Blachernae, where the representatives of the priesthood were mostly buried (p. 202). The bishops, priests, monks and sometimes nobility were buried in the chapels–kimeteries (special covered cemeteries) at the city's largest basilicas (p. 210).

The most controversial of M. V. Fomin's ideas is his assumption that, similarly to Constantinople, in Cherson «funeral processions and funerals were organized on the basis of contributions from ergasteries (shops) who had some tax inducements» (p. 209) and that there were approximately twenty of them (p. 182–183). It is unlikely that the unique situation characteristic of the capital of the Byzantine Empire could, without additional evidence and appropriate adjustments, be transposed on a provincial urban center. It can just as well be assumed that the expenses related to the organization of funerals were incurred by the families of the deceased.

On the whole, we are convinced by the scholar's main conclusion that «the Christian funerary tradition, equipment, and customs were completely formed in Cherson before the tenth century» (p. 202) and «the evolution of the Christian funerary customs and the related traditions came to an end» at that time (p. 211). In general, the book will be of interest to the students of not only the early medieval Crimean Chersonese–Cherson, but also other Byzantine provincial towns, because it contains a significant amount of material almost unknown to Western scholars.

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