

Ceramics in the burial rites of the Neolithic-Early Bronze Age in the Ukrainian steppe

Nadezhda Kotova, Larissa Spitsyna

Institute of Archaeology, Kiev, UA

kotova@i.com.ua, spitsyna@iananu.org.ua

ABSTRACT – Numerous Neolithic/Bronze Age burials have provided important information about the appearance and development of the tradition of using pottery in burial rites among the Pontic steppe population. The first pottery has been dated to the first period of the Azov-Dnieper culture (5950–5300 calBC). The small sherds found in graves were the remains of broken vessels used during funeral feasts on the surfaces of cemeteries. During the Early Eneolithic the sacrificial sites of the Azov-Dnieper culture became larger and included numerous broken pots, which were made especially for funeral feasts. Under the influence of the Balkans, the population of Sredniy Stog Eneolithic began to place vessels in graves, and continued to use pottery during funeral feasts near graves. The Middle and Late Eneolithic populations retained these traditions.

IZVLEČEK – Številni neolitski in bronastodobni grobovi so zagotovili pomembne informacije o uporabi keramike v pogrebnih ritualih med ljudstvi v Pontski stepi. Prva keramika je bila datirana v prvo fazo kulture Azov-Dnjeper (5950–5300 calBC). Keramični fragmenti v grobovih so ostanki razbitih posod, ki so bile uporabljene pri pogrebnih gostijah na grobiščih. Ritualni prostori v zgodnjem eneolitiku v Azov-Dnieper kulturi postanejo večji. Večje je tudi število posod, ki so bile narejene za pogrebne gostije. Pod vplivom Balkana so eneolitska ljudstva Srednji Stog začela polagati posode tudi v grobove. V srednjem in poznem eneolitiku so ohranila to tradicijo.

KEY WORDS – Neolithic; Eneolithic; Bronze Age; Ukrainian steppe; pottery; burial rites; sacrifice sites; grave goods

Numerous funeral monuments have been excavated in the Ukrainian steppe. The oldest comprise cemeteries with flexed inhumations dating to the Late Paleolithic and Mesolithic. During the Late Mesolithic, the first interments in supine position appeared, and this type of burial became prevalent at the end of the Mesolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic. The Vasilievka 2 cemetery dates to this period at c. 6850–6400 calBC. A tortoise shell from one grave at this cemetery has been interpreted as the first vessel.¹

Pottery use in everyday life spread among the Ukrainian steppe population at c. 6300 calBC – during

the Early Neolithic, but only after 300 years do the first ceramics appeared in Middle (c. 5950–5600 calBC) and Late Neolithic cemeteries (c. 5600–5300 calBC) (Kotova 2009). The pottery fragments were found in graves at Mamaj Gora (Toscev 2005), Vovnigi 2 (Bodjanskiy, Kotova 2004) and Vasilievka 5 cemeteries (Kotova 2003), all from the first period of the Azov-Dnieper culture. The culture spread across the western Azov Sea area, the Dnieper and the Crimean steppes. The cemeteries consisted of single and double burials in small separate graves arranged in rows. The small fragments of pottery in the graves most probably came from broken pots used in funeral feasts, remains being found in traces of fire

¹ Unfortunately, we have not had its image, because materials has not been published yet and a field report about the excavation in the 50-th of last century was not given in the archives of Institute of Archaeology of Ukrainian Academy of Science.

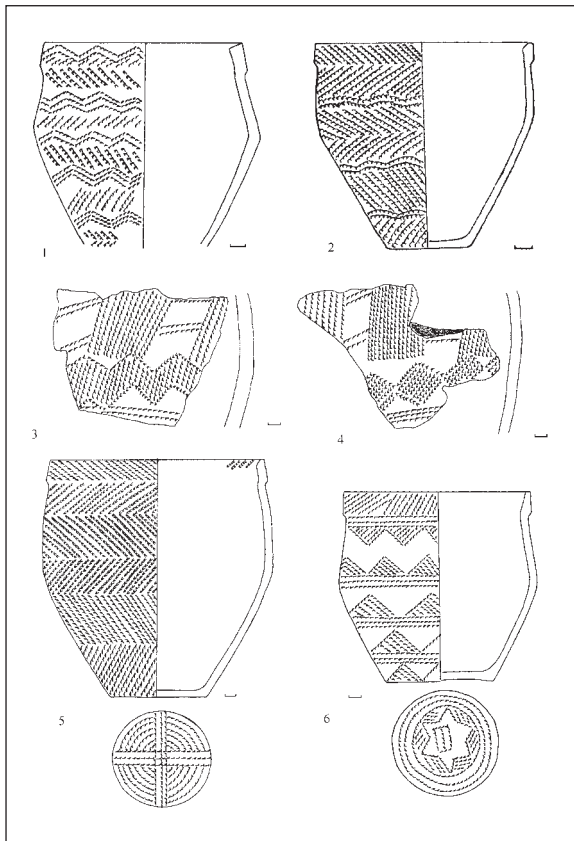


Fig. 1. Pottery from the Nikolsky cemetery from the second phase of the Azov-Dnieper culture.

on cemetery surfaces. All the fragments are very similar to pottery from Azov-Dnieper culture settlements.

The tradition of pottery use in funeral feasts developed in the Early Eneolithic, in the second phase of the Azov-Dnieper culture (c. 5200–4750 calBC). The Nikolskiy, Lysaja Gora, Yasinovatka and Kairy cemeteries of this phase consisted of large pits which were used repeatedly over a long period, resulting in the significant destruction of skeletons (Telegin, Potehkina 1987; Kotova 2003). People made sacrifice sites in the cemetery areas, as indicated by the remains of fires, abundant broken pottery, tools, adornments, and animal bones (Fig. 1). It is interesting that the pottery from these sites is similar to the pottery from late Azov-Dnieper settlements (flat bottom, collar on rim, linear and stroke ornamentations), although there are some differences. In everyday life, people

Fig. 3 (right). Pottery of the Sredniy Stog culture: 1. Burial 1 at Igren cemetery; 2. Burial 15 at Igren cemetery; 3–4. Burial 7 in kurgan 5 of Mukhin; 5. Burial 4 in kurgan 31/7 at Popov Khutor; 6. Burial 1 at Veselaya Roshcha 15; 7. Burial 5 in Mokry Chaltyr kurgan 2; 8. Burial 55 in Aleksandrovsk kurgan 1.

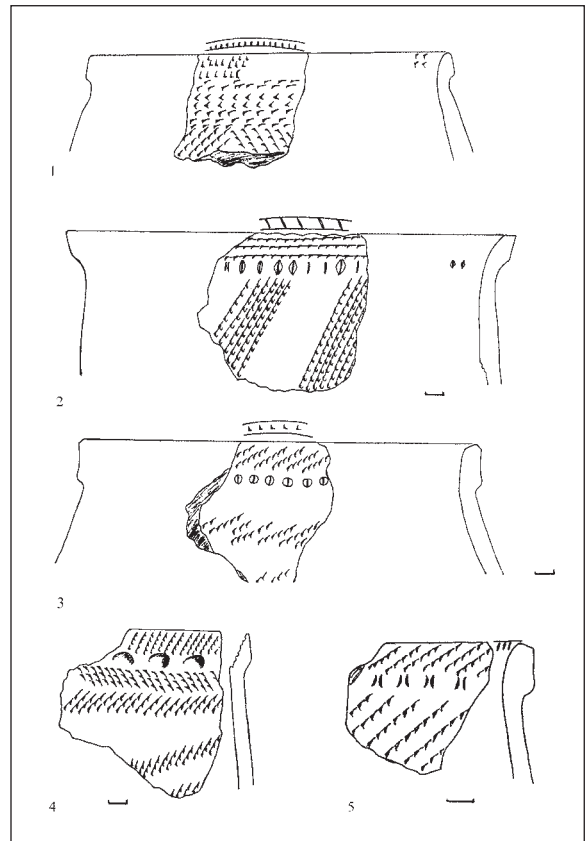
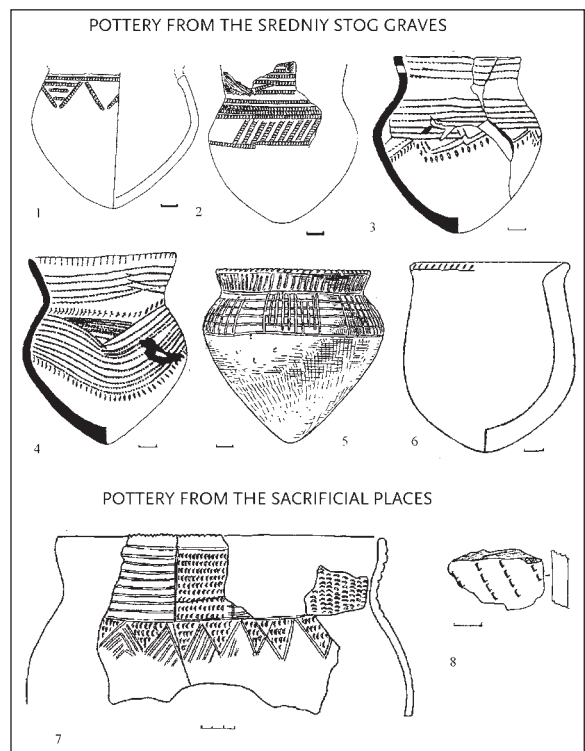


Fig. 2. Pottery from the Strilcha Skelya site in the second phase of the Azov-Dnieper culture.

used pots with necks, and with simple ornamental compositions (horizontal lines or rows, herring-bone pattern) (Fig. 2). This pottery was easy to use; the



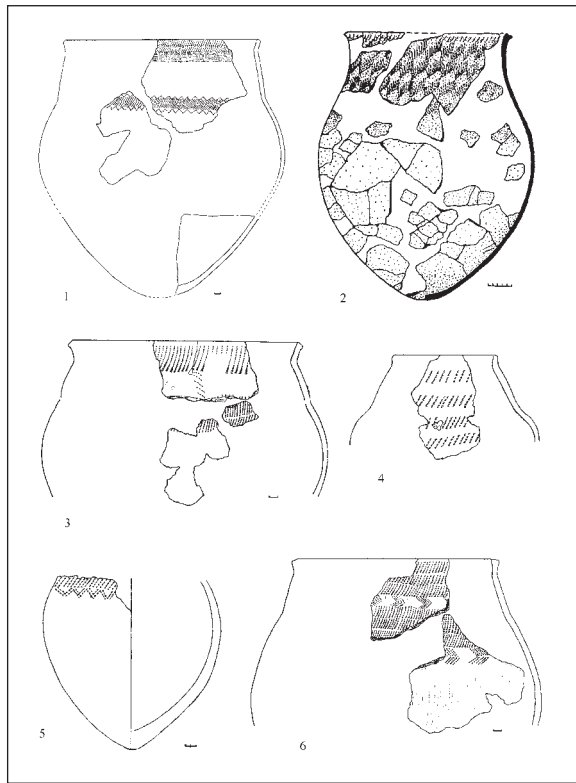


Fig. 4. Pottery from Dereivka culture sacrificial sites: 1. Balka Kvityana; 2. Burial 16 in the Novo-oleksandrovsy kurgan; 3. Burial 18 in Kamenka-Dneprovska kurgan 11; 4. Burial 5 at the Yasinovatka cemetery; 5. Burial 3 in Buzivka kurgan 1; 6. Burial 3 in from Vilnogrushivka kurgan 2.

narrow neck made it easier to carry. On the other hand, vessels without necks predominate in the pottery at cemeteries. They were ornamented with complicated compositions which included zigzags, triangles, rhomboids, and rectangles (Fig. 1), while the bases were decorated with stars and crosses. These facts allow us to assume that the Azov-Dnieper population made special pottery for funeral rituals, and its ornamental symbolism was connected to ideas about death and the transition from life to death. Pots without necks were difficult to handle and not intended for prolonged use, being broken during funeral rituals on the surfaces of cemeteries.

In the Early Eneolithic, the Sredniy Stog culture spread across the Pontic steppe, and the northern Azov Sea area (Kotova 2008). People constructed individual graves with flexed inhumations in small cemeteries or under kurgans. Pottery appeared in burial rites after the migration of some Sredniy Stog people to the Dnieper valley at c. 5000 calBC. Traces of sacrificial sites and funeral feasts near graves are not numerous. They include pottery fragments (Figs. 3.7, 8), and flint and bone artifacts.

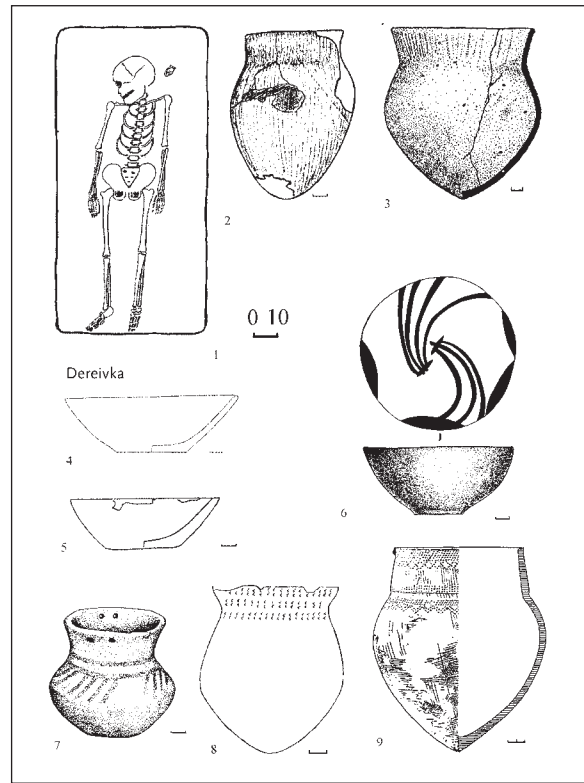


Fig. 5. Burial and vessels of the Dereivka culture: 1-2. Burial 1 at Boguslav 23; 3. Burial 4 at Dereivka cemetery; 5. Burial 13 at Igren cemetery; 6. Destroyed burial at the Igren cemetery; 7. Burials 7 and 8 at Igren cemetery; 8. Burial in Kabaki kurgan 1; 9. Burial at Balka Kvityana.

The pottery was first used as a grave good at this time in the Igren cemetery and Mukhin kurgan of the Sredniy Stog culture (Fig. 3.1-6). This practice was borrowed from Balkan-Carpathian cultures as a result of contacts and exchange connected with the distribution of copper tools and adornments in the Eastern European steppe from western regions.

Most vessels among the Sredniy Stog grave goods were broken before being placed in graves. Pots were placed near the head of the deceased. In chil-

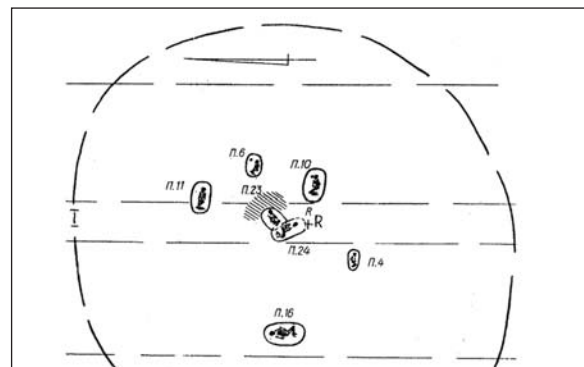


Fig. 6. Kurgan 2 at Obloyi.

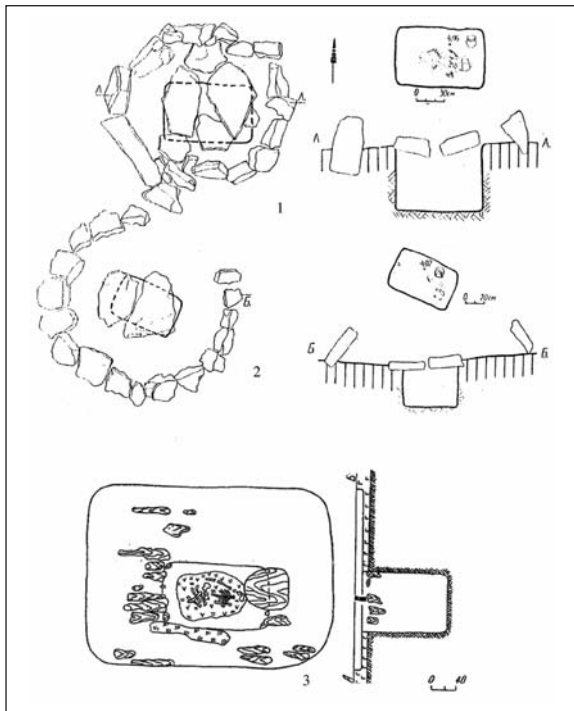


Fig. 7. 1. Burial 5 in Volonterivka kurgan 1; 2. Burial 4 in Volonterivka kurgan 1; 3. Burial 19 in kurgan 3 at Sokolove III.

dren's burials the pottery was found twice as often as in adult graves (Kotova 2008). The vessels deposited in graves were smaller than the pots from the Sredniy Stog settlements. We may hypothesise that it is possible that the Sredniy Stog people made special small vessels as grave goods.

The tradition of using pottery as grave goods and at funeral feasts was also present in the Dereivka Middle Eneolithic culture, which replaced the Sredniy Stog culture in the Pontic steppe. The Dereivka culture was formed in the southern region of the modern forest-steppe zone of the Dnieper basin during an arid period at c. 4300–4200 calBC. Its formation was the result of the assimilation of the local Neolithic population (the Dnieper-Donets and the Azov-Dnieper cultures) by migrants of the Sredniy Stog culture from the steppe zone (Kotova 2008). The Dereivka people inherited the tradition of funeral feasting not only from the Sredniy Stog culture, but also from the latest peripheral groups of the Azov-Dnieper population. These groups survived on the northern border of the steppe zone before 4300–4200 calBC, whereas other groups of Azov-Dnieper people in the southern steppe were assimilated by the Sredniy Stog population at c. 4750 calBC.

The inhumations in flexed and supine positions with different orientations were characteristic in Dereiv-



Fig. 8. Burial 9 in kurgan 1 at Verkhnya Mayivka XVIII.

ka culture. Cemeteries were located near settlement sites, but the burials were under kurgans which were located some distance from settlements.

In funeral feasts, the Dereivka population used large pots with peculiar shapes and ornamentation which differed from the ceramics found at settlements (Fig. 4). The funeral pots had very long convex necks with an everted rim. It was decorated with comb imprints, including 'walking comb' (Fig. 4.3).

The tradition of placing small pots in the Dereivka graves was a Sredniy Stog legacy. As opposed to pottery from sacrificial sites, some pots in graves were very similar to ceramics from Dereivka culture settlements (Figs. 5. 2–5; 8 and 9). But some others were imports from the Tripolye culture, which was located

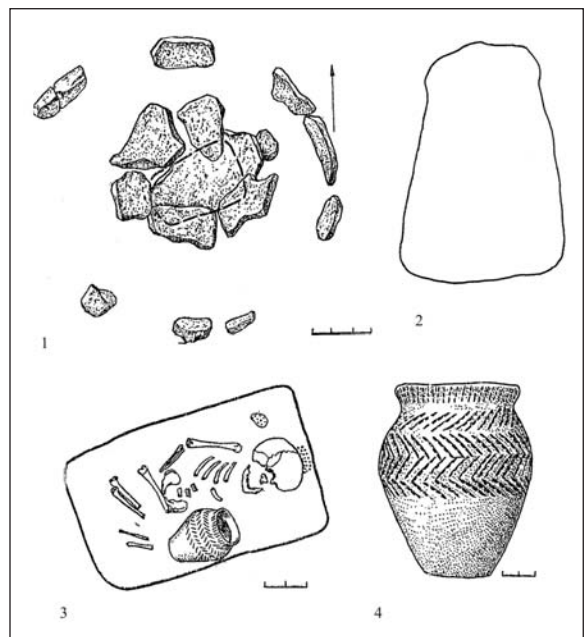


Fig. 9. Burial 13 in kurgan 1 of Kovalivka IV.

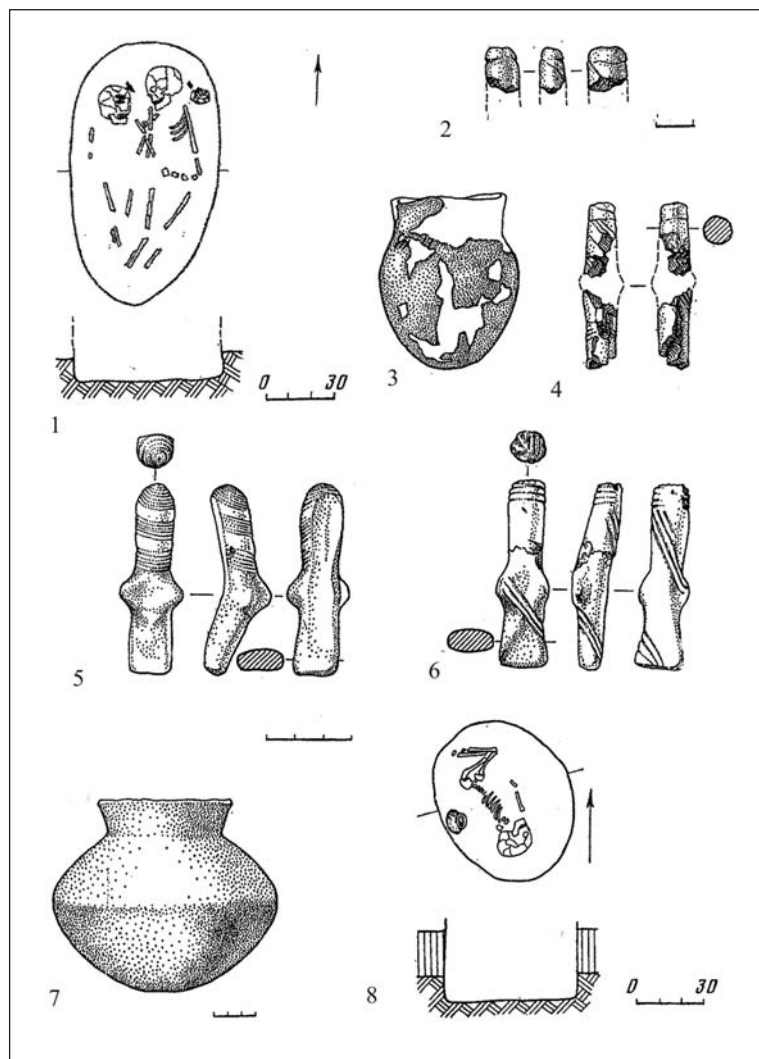


Fig. 10. Kurgan 3 at Chkalivske: 1-4 burial 25; 5-8 - burial 32.

to the north-west in the forest-steppe zone between the Dnieper and Dnestr Rivers (Figs. 5.6., 7).

The Rogachik culture in the Late Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age was located in the Crimea steppe, between the Dnieper and Southern Bug Rivers, and the Repin culture between the Dnieper and the Don. The settlements are bigger and the burials are more numerous in Rogachik than in the Repin culture. This may relate to the different environments - the dry steppe near the Azov Sea and the more humid Crimean steppe.

The funeral practices in both cultures were similar. The majority of burials were placed under kurgans, which attained a height of 0.5-2.5m and diameters up to 20.0m. Burials often formed small

cemeteries from several graves below the one burial mound, where they were placed in a circular arrangement, or formed from one to six rows (Fig. 6). Ditches and stone cromlechs appeared around the kurgans. Cromlechs were also constructed around separate graves (Figs. 7.1; 9.1). The burial pits were often covered with stone blocks or massive logs (Figs. 7.2, 3, 4; 9.1), including an anthropomorphous stele (Fig. 9.2). (Rassamakin 2004; Spitsyna 2007).

Flexed supine inhumations were oriented to the east, sometimes with minor deviations. A few burials were intensively painted with ochre. In other cases, skulls and limbs were powdered, or stains of ochre were located on the floor. The inventory included mainly pots and flint tools. The Rogachik grave goods included cylinders or cylinder fragments from ochre, and Serezlievka type clay figurines (Fig.10.2, 4, 5, 6).

The pots placed in burials were more numerous than the vessels used for ritual activities near the graves (Fig. 11). The pots, sometimes in pairs, were placed near the head, back, chest or pelvis of the deceased (Figs. 8; 9.3; 10.1, 8). The tradition of funeral feasting near graves was also maintained; traces are seen in traces

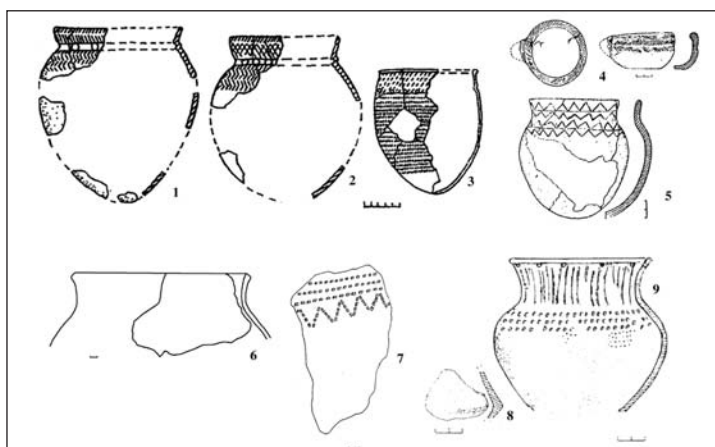


Fig. 11. Pottery from funeral feasts in Repin (1-5) and Rogachyk cultures (6-9). 1-3. Kurgan 3 at Sokolove III; 4-5. Volonterivka kurgan 1; 6. Augustynivka kurgan 7; 7. Lupareve kurgan 1; 8-9. Kurgan 1 at Kovalivka VII.

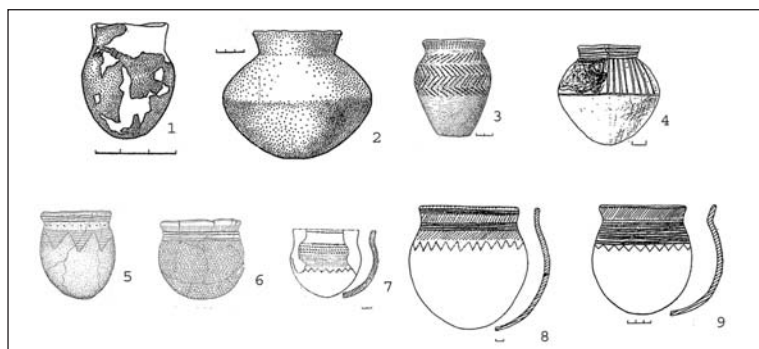


Fig. 12. Pottery in graves in Rogachyk (1–4) and Repin (5–11) cultures: 1. burial 25 in Chkalivske kurgan 3; 2. burial 32 in Chkalivske kurgan 3; 3. burial 13 in Kovalivka kurgan 1; 4. burial 1 in Chkalivske kurgan 3; 5–6. burial 7 in kurgan 1 at Verkhnya Mayivka XVIII; 7. burial 4 in Volonterivka kurgan 1; 8. burial 9 in Kremenivka kurgan 6; 9. burial 8 in Kremenivka kurgan 6.

of fire and accumulations of animal bones and broken pots (Fig. 12).

Conclusions

The Neolithic, Eneolithic and Bronze Age burials the Pontic steppe show the gradual inclusion of pottery in burial practices. The tradition of using ceramics during funeral feasts on cemetery surfaces appeared in the Azov-Dnieper Middle Neolithic culture (c. 6000 calBC) and continued during the Late Neolithic c.

5600–5200 calBC. At that time, people did not make special pottery for the burial rituals, and only a few small fragments of vessels appeared in graves or on the surfaces of cemeteries. In the Early Eneolithic in the Azov-Dnieper culture (c. 5200–4750 calBC) pots with complicated ornamentation was produced especially for funeral feasts. It was intentionally broken on cemetery surfaces.

Later, in the Sredniy Stog culture (c. 4800–4300 calBC) the Balkan-Carpathians tradition is recognized in the use of small pots as grave goods. In the Middle Eneolithic, the number of burials with pottery increased, and the Dereivka culture preserved both traditions: placing small pots in graves and making special ceramics for funeral feasts held near graves (c. 4300–3300 calBC). Imported pottery was sometimes placed in graves, but only local ceramics were broken on sacrificial sites. In the Late Eneolithic, the burial constructions of the steppe population became more complicated and the quantity of vessels in graves and at sacrificial sites increased. In addition, some imported pots came into use during funeral feasting.

∴

REFERENCES

- BODJANSKIY A. V., KOTOVA N. S. 2004. Vovnigskiy 2 posdneolicheskii mogilnik (The Vovnigi 2 Late Neolithic Cemetery). *Archeologichni pam'yaki ta istoriya starodavnogo naseleння Ukrainy (Archaeological monuments and history of ancient population in Ukraine)*. Vezsha, Lutsk: 98–110 (in Russian).
- KOTOVA N. S. 2003. *Neolithization in Ukraine*. British Archaeological Reports IS 1109. Archaeopress. Oxford.
2008. *Early Eneolithic in the Pontic Steppes*. British Archaeological Reports 1735. Archaeopress. Oxford.
2009. Pogrebalnye pamyatniki Surskoi kultury (Burial monuments of the Surskaja culture). *Archeologicheskie pamyatniki Vostochnoi Evropy (Archeological monuments of Eastern Europe)* 14: 39–53 (in Russian).
- RASSAMAKIN Y. Y. 2004. *Die nordpontische Steppe in der Kupferzeit. Gräber aus der Mitte des 5. Jts. bis Ende des 4. Jts. v. Chr.* Archäologie in Eurasien 17. Verlag Philipp von Zabern GmbH. Mainz am Rhein.
- SPITSYNA L. A. 2007. Pohovalni pamyatky Repinskoi kultury (Burial monuments of the Repin culture). *Zapysky Naukovogo tovarystva imeni T. G. Shevchenka. Pratsi arkeologichnoi komisiyi (Paper of Shevchenko's scientific society. Works of the archaeological commission)*. Lviv (in Ukrainian).
- TELEGIN D. Y. and POTEKHINA I. D. 1987. *Neolithic Cemeteries and Populations in the Dnieper Basin*. British Archaeological Reports IS 383. Archaeopress. Oxford.
- TOSCEV G. N. 2005. Die neolithische Nekropole Mamaj-Gora im unteren Dneprgebiet. *Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja* 34: 21–45.