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## HOUSES DUG INTO THE GROUND IN ANCIENT NIKONION IN THE LOWER DNIESTER REGION

**Abstract:** Dugouts or semi-dugouts were typical form of the oldest Greek dwelling houses in the northern Pontus Euxinus region. The Lower Dniester region has yielded a very interesting evidence for studies on the history of houses dug into the ground. The Lower Dniester region was dominated in Antiquity by two Greek *poleis*, Nikonion and Tyras. Until the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC houses dug into the ground were predominant dwelling architecture at Nikonion as well as in rural settlements on Nikonion *chora*. At Nikonion more than 20 houses dug into the ground are recovered. They are scattered in different places of the mound covering the remains of Ancient city. The house dug into the ground, registered as no. 196, located in the southern part of the mound and excavated in 1995, is analysed in details. The archaeological evidence confirms that the dugout no. 196 was used in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC. It also suggests that the dugout has been left in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC.

**Keywords:** Ancient world, Northern Black Sea area, Lower Dniester region, Ancient Nikonion, dugouts

Dugouts<sup>1</sup> or semi-dugouts<sup>2</sup> were typical form of the oldest Greek dwelling houses in the northern Pontus Euxinus region. From Istrus<sup>3</sup>, in the West, to the cities of the Bosphorus, in the East. More than 200 dugouts dated to the period from the end of the seventh to the third quarter of the sixth centuries BC have been excavated in Berezan island<sup>4</sup>. At Olbia 40 houses dug into the ground, located regularly along of the „street”, have been discovered. Similar dwellings were registered also in other parts of the city and on the territory of Olbian *chora*<sup>5</sup>. Dugouts have been used in Chersonesus<sup>6</sup>, Panticapaeum, and other Bosporan cities<sup>7</sup>. A suggestion has been proposed<sup>8</sup> that houses dug into the ground were typical architecture for early Milesian colonies in the Pontus Euxinus Northern area.

The Lower Dniester region (Fig. 1) was dominated in Antiquity by two Greek *poleis*, Nikonion<sup>9</sup> and Tyras<sup>10</sup>, at present located on left and right banks of Dniester liman<sup>11</sup>. Following to the archaeological evidence<sup>12</sup> Nikonion (Fig. 2) was the most important center in the region from the end of the sixth century BC or rather very early fifth century BC<sup>13</sup>. To the middle of the fifth century BC Greek settlements were located mostly on the left bank of the river. In the middle of the fifth century BC rural settlements on the *chora* of Nikonion collapsed and their inhabitants settled

<sup>9</sup> North of the village Roxolany, south of Ovidiopol', Odessa oblast, Ukraine.

<sup>10</sup> Modern Bilgorod-Dnistrovskii. Karyshkovskii and Kleiman 1985; Samoilova 1988.

<sup>11</sup> In Antiquity the mouth of Dniester river had a form of delta with two branches. Agbunov 1978, 118-120; Agbunov 1983, 114; Bruyako and Karpov 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Archaeological exploration of Nikonion has begun in 1957. From 1995 archaeological exploration of Nikonion was carried out by common expedition of the Odessa Archaeological Museum of National Academy of Science of the Ukraine (under the direction of N.M. Sekerskaya) and the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland (under the direction of M. Mielczarek).

<sup>13</sup> The date of the foundation of Nikonion is indicated by the chronology of the oldest Ionian ceramics found during archaeological excavations. See Sekerskaya 1989; Sekerskaya 1997; Zaginailo and Sekerskaya 1997 – the end of the sixth century BC. New opinion on the chronology of Ionian ceramics – Buiskikh 2013a, 116-155; Buiskikh 2013b. See also Kerschner 2006.

<sup>1</sup> This article is an effect of the discussion on the archaeological aspects of houses dug or semi dug into the ground which the author had a pleasure to develop with Prof. Dr. hab. Tadeusz Poklewski by many years.

<sup>2</sup> On the definition see Tsetschlade 2004, 226-228.

<sup>3</sup> See Alexandrescu 1990, 56-60.

<sup>4</sup> Kryzhitskii 1982, 20; Solovyov 1999; Tsetschlade 2004, 230.

<sup>5</sup> The dugouts were discovered above all in the AGD part, in the North of the Upper City. Kryzhitskii 1982, 11-12; Kryzhitskii et al. 1989, 41-51; Kryzhitskii et al. 1999, 46-47; Tsetschlade 2004, 230-236.

<sup>6</sup> Tsetschlade 2004, 242-244.

<sup>7</sup> Tolstikov 1992, 59-62; Vinogradov 1992, 101-103; Butjagin 1997; Solov'ev and Butyagin 1998; Butyagin 2001; Tsetschlade 2004, 236-240.

<sup>8</sup> Butyagin 2001, 37; Tsetschlade 2004, 271-272.

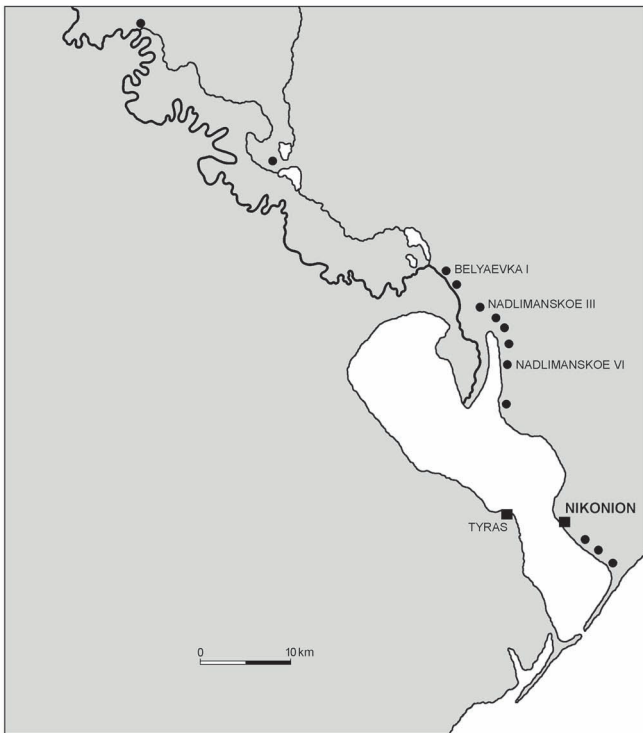


Fig. 1. Lower Dniester region in the fifth century BC. After Okhotnikov 1990. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.



Fig. 2. Ancient Nikonion. Southern part of the mound. Area of excavations. Photo M. Mielczarek.

at Nikonion<sup>14</sup>. The city was destroyed in the last thirties of the fourth century BC, most probably in effect of Zopyrion 331 BC campaign, which was finished at Olbia.

Until the middle of the fifth century BC houses dug into the ground were predominant dwelling architecture at Nikonion<sup>15</sup> (only one above-ground house is dated for the period<sup>16</sup>), as well as in rural settlements on Nikonion *chora*<sup>17</sup> (for instance Belyaevka<sup>18</sup> and Nadlimanskoe<sup>19</sup>). On the territory of the *chora* the most popular were dugouts constructed

on round plan<sup>20</sup>. At Nikonion any house dug into the ground built on round or oval plan has been found<sup>21</sup>.

At Nikonion<sup>22</sup> more than 20 houses dug into the ground are recovered<sup>23</sup>. They are scattered in different places<sup>24</sup> of the mound covering the remains of Ancient Nikonion<sup>25</sup>. Near the dugouts storage pits were registered (among them also these for grain). In significant number Nikonion dugouts are partially destroyed. By the Dniester (as dwellings nos. 2 and 3) or by foundation trenches or basements of the above-ground houses with stone or mud bricks walls, built in the middle of the fifth century BC or later.

Permanent problem exists, were the houses fully dug into the ground, i.e. the roof construction<sup>26</sup> was based directly on the surface of the ground, or they were dug only in part – so called semi-dugouts<sup>27</sup>. In the case of Nikonion, by the state of preservation is almost impossible to define the house as dugout or semi-dugout<sup>28</sup>. The term „dugout” is used conventionally. N.M. Sekerskaya has treated the houses as semi-dugout, from respect of mud bricks presence inside some of them<sup>29</sup>. She has interpreted the bricks as rest of walls.

Houses dug into the ground excavated at Nikonion are rectangular in plan<sup>30</sup>. In some cases the corners were rounded.

The houses have an area from 11 to 40 sq. m - the largest house (no. 1, in south-eastern part of the city; it has the area of 40 m<sup>2</sup>), was enlarged when was in use. Floors of the houses dug into the ground, made of tamped clay, are located 0,6-1,4 m below the present surface of the ground<sup>31</sup>. In two houses (registered as no. 9, in south-western region of the city, and no. 197, in the central part of the mound), the floor was covered by clay several times. In the dugout no. 9 a part of the floor was tailed by small stones. On the floor fragments of Chian, Lesbian and Thasian amphoras were found as well as fragments of Ionian wares, Chian cups, and Attic black-glazed ceramics. Walls of these dugouts were vertical, not faced with clay. Such construction

<sup>20</sup> See Dzis-Raiko et al. 2012, 52-53.

<sup>21</sup> Kryzhitskii 1993, 32 f.

<sup>22</sup> Number of people settled in Nikonion in the first half of the fifth century BC by V.M. Otreshko was estimate to 300-360. Otreshko 1990, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 21; Tsetskhladze 2004, 236. I'm grateful to Dr. N.M. Sekerskaya for her permission to use in this article plans of dugouts published in the book „Antichnyi Nikonii i ego okrug v VI-IV vv. do n.e.” – Sekerskaya 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Andrunina 1970, 236; Sekerskaya 1989, 20-30.

<sup>25</sup> At present exists only Upper City. The Lower City, has been destroyed finally by the Dniester river in 1904.

<sup>26</sup> On this topic Kryzhitskii 1982, 13-14; Kryzhitskii et al. 1999, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Tsetskhladze 2004, 228-229.

<sup>28</sup> The same Sekerskaya 1989, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 22, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Kryzhitskii 1982, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Kryzhitskii 1982, 19; Sekerskaya 1989, 3.

<sup>16</sup> This is mud bricks house united with dugouts no. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Okhotnikov 1990, 10-16.

<sup>18</sup> Okhotnikov 1990, 10-13.

<sup>19</sup> Okhotnikov 1981, 85-89; Dzis-Raiko et al. 2012, 45-49.

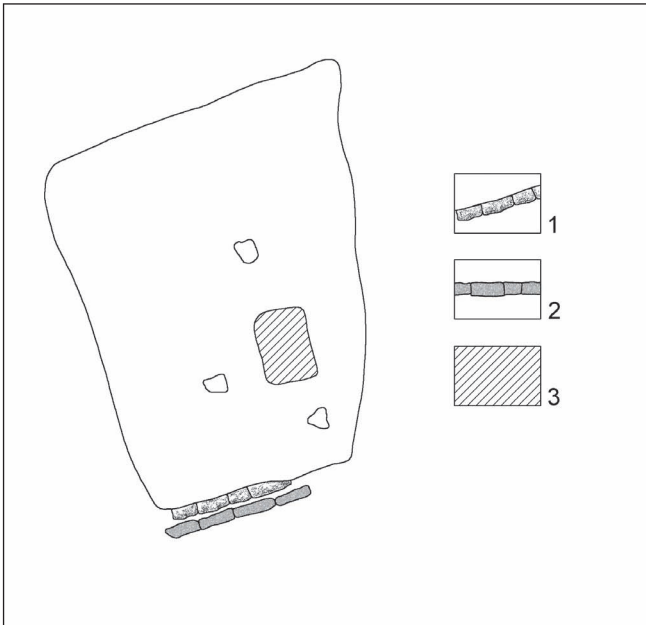


Fig. 3. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 4. 1 – stone wall; 2 – mud bricks wall; 3 – fired clay. After Sekerskaya 1989. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.

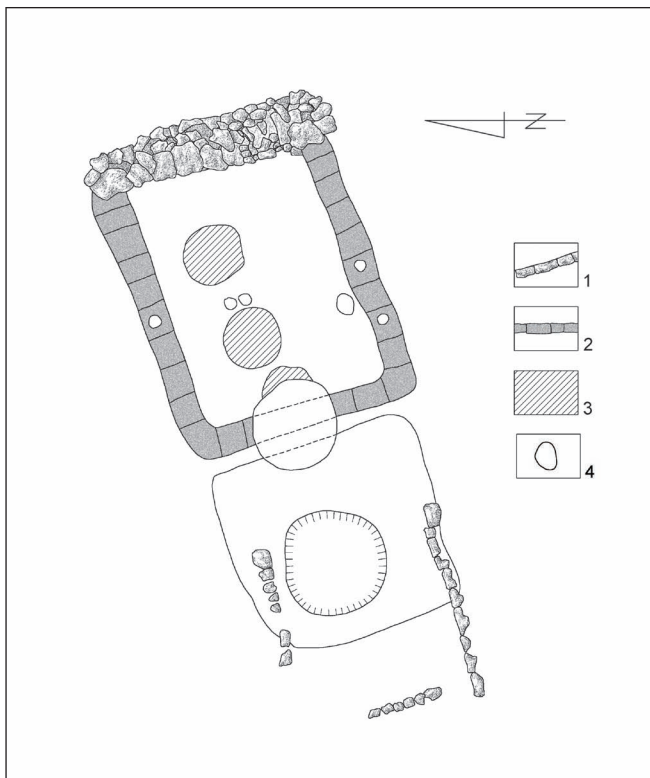


Fig. 4. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 5. 1 – stone wall; 2 – mud bricks wall; 3 – fired clay; 4 – pit. After Sekerskaya 1989. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.

is typical for dugouts of the north-western Pontic region<sup>32</sup>. Distinctive is a house registered under no. 4 (Fig. 3), located in the south-eastern part of the mound. A fragment of its wall was constructed on the ground in mud bricks placed on



Fig. 5. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 196 during excavations; level of the floor. Photo. M. Mielczarek.

stone foundation. Such situation, which should be treated as a reliable evidence that house dug partially into the ground was in use, is registered in three dugouts. In one case the house dug into the ground (registered under no. 5) coexisted with a above-ground building (area of 22,5 sq. m) – preserved walls built from mud bricks (40x40x10) had 0,40 m in the highest points (Fig. 4).

In most houses dug into the ground hearths were discovered. They were located mostly by walls of the house – in the house no. 1 the hearth diameter 1,0 m was located by the northern wall.

In 1995 the house dug into the ground, registered as no. 196, was excavated in the southern part of the mound (Fig. 5). This was a rectangular (4,5x3,5? m) with rounded corners construction, located on the „line” North-South. Eastern part of the dugout has been destroyed by the stone wall of the above-ground house (registered under the number 162; house no. 167), dated to the fourth century BC.

The upper niveau of the dugout was destroyed. The central part of it was fullfilled stones, not connected with the dugout (Fig. 6). Between the stones a fragment of handmade Scythian ceramics was found, as well with this layer should be connected a fragment of black-glazed Attic pottery dated to the fourth century BC. The lower part of the dugout, with the floor, was preserved in good state (Fig. 7). The floor of the dugout was ca 3,0 m below the ground level.

Walls (we can discuss about the lowest parties of the house only) were horizontal and not faced with clay, what is characteristic for Nikonion. The floor was clay-covered. In the central part of dugout, direct on the floor, a group of stones was registered. They were placed just by two holes 0,40 m in diameter and 0,30-0,35 m deep. Such holes were found in several dugouts<sup>33</sup>. The holes and the stones (at least in part) could be related with construction of wooden support of a roof. Discussion on the form of a roof is very difficult, as only holes located in the central part were registered. In the case of dual-pitched roof minimum two

<sup>32</sup> Kryzhitskii 1982, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 29.



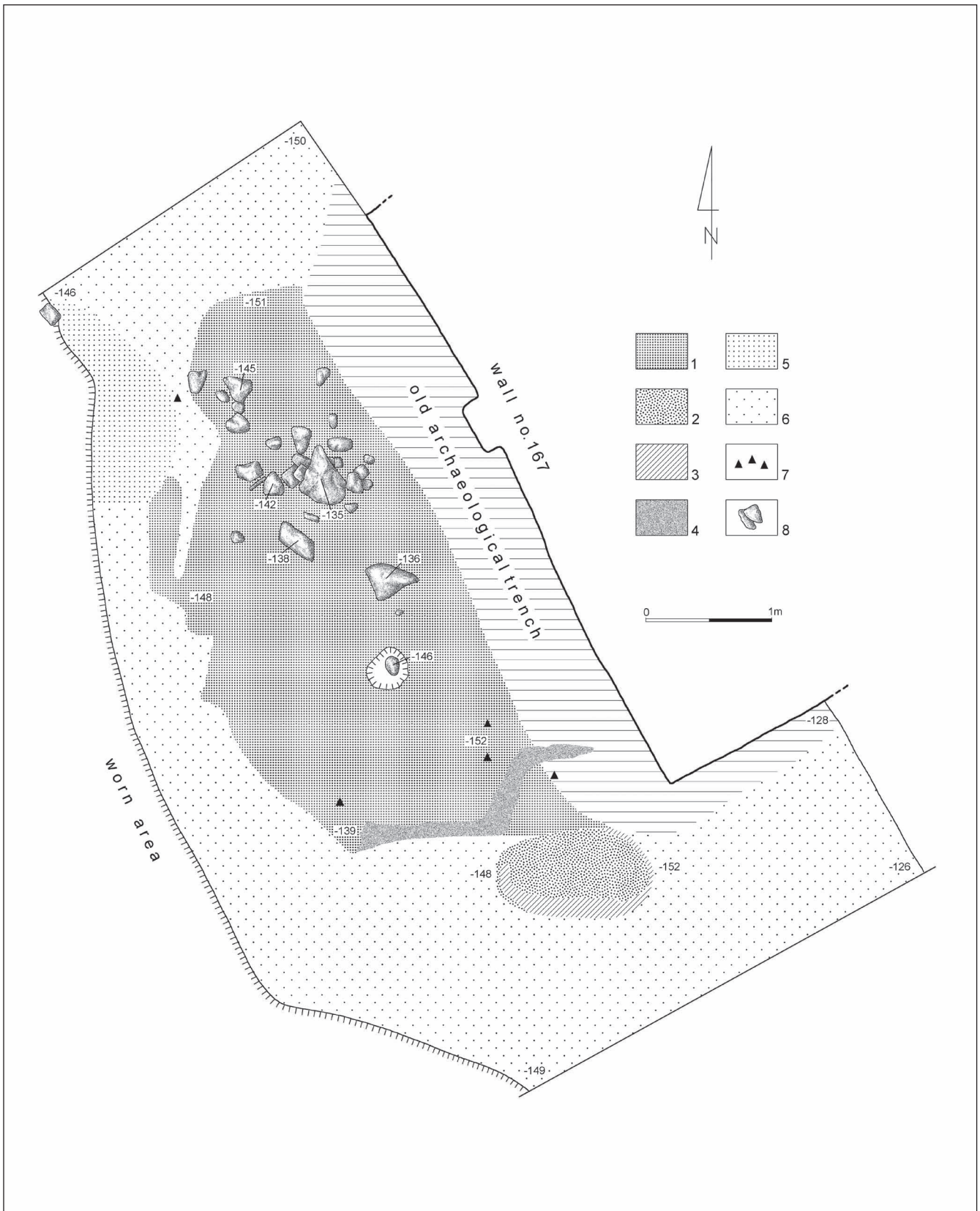


Fig. 6. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 196. Upper level. 1 – grey sand; 2 – dark grey sand mixed with ash; 3 – orange fired clay; 4 – ash; 5 – grey-yellow sand; 6 – yellow sand-untouched soil; 7 – ceramics; 8 – stones. After the field plan by M. Obuchowski. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.

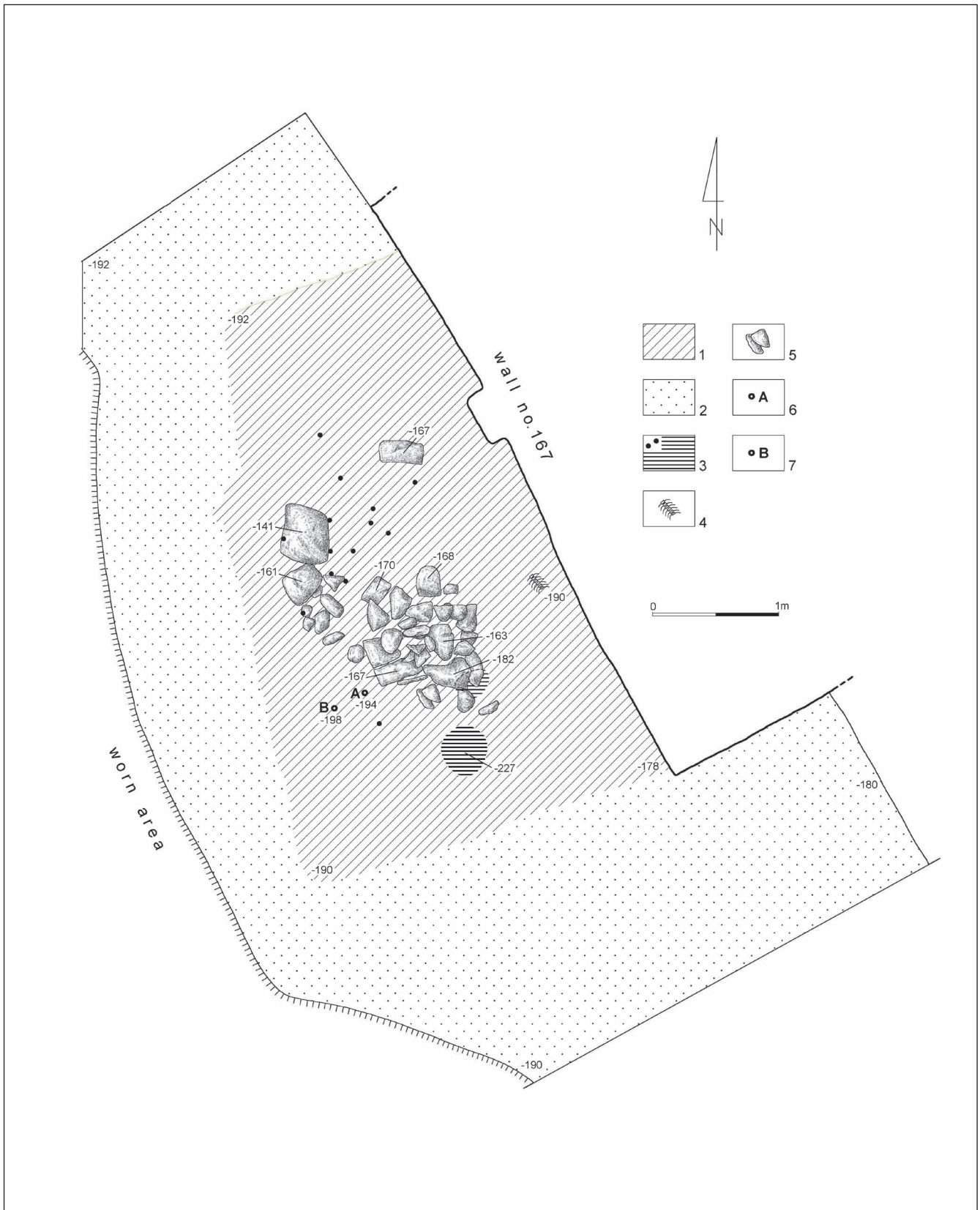


Fig. 7. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 196. Floor level. 1 – floor clay; 2 – yellow sandtouched soil; 3 – pillar holes; 4 – fish bones; 5 – stones; 6 – coin of Istrus; 7 – coin of Istrus (or Scyles coin). After the field plan by R. Niedźwiedz. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.

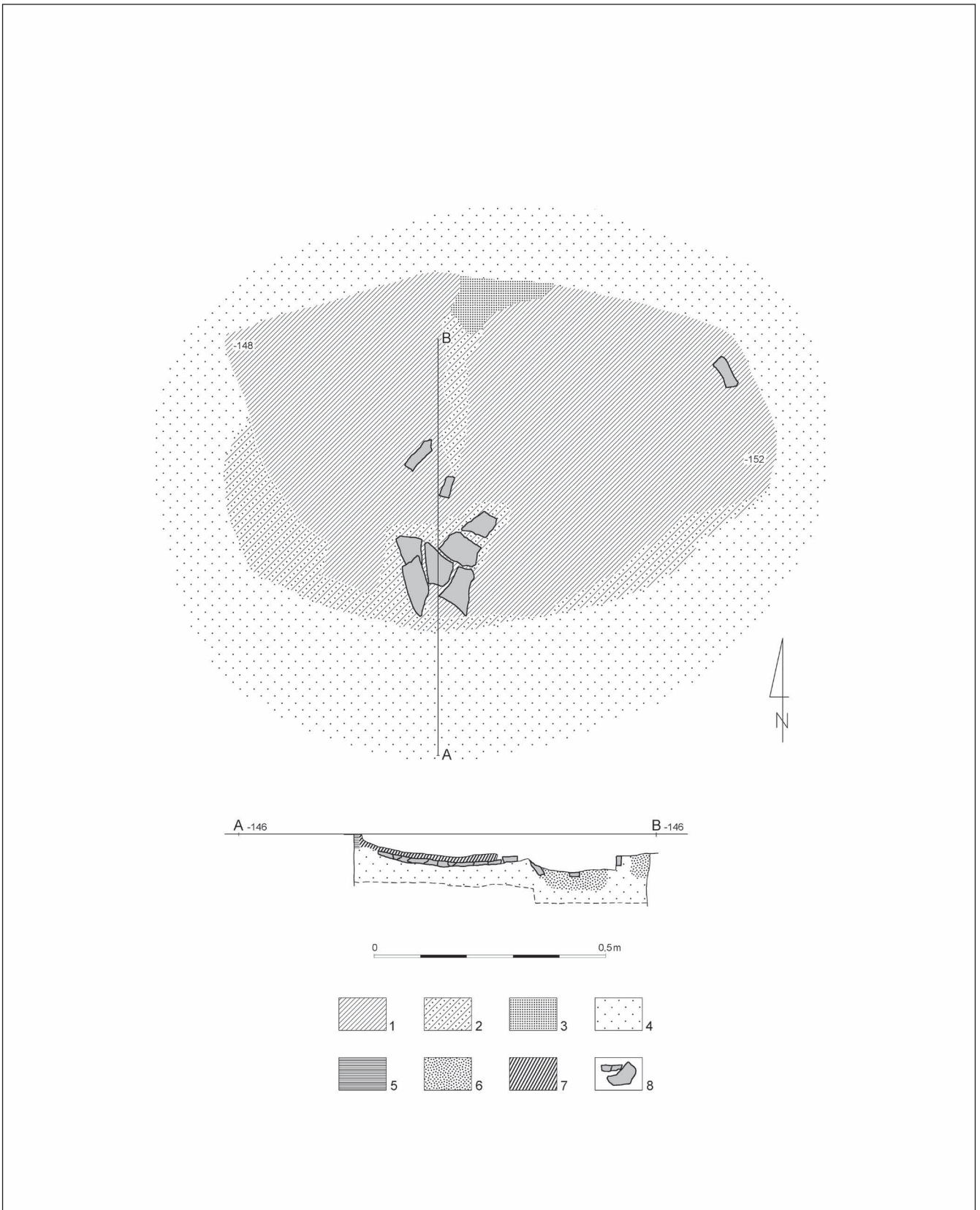


Fig. 8. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 196. Plan of the hearth. 1 – clay; 2 – clay mixed with sand; 3 – grey sand; 4 – yellow sand-untouched soil; 5 – fired sand; 6 – dark grey sand mixed with ash; 7 – fired clay; 8 – ceramics. After the field plan by J. Bloch. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.





Fig. 9. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 196. Hearth. Photo M. Mielczarek.

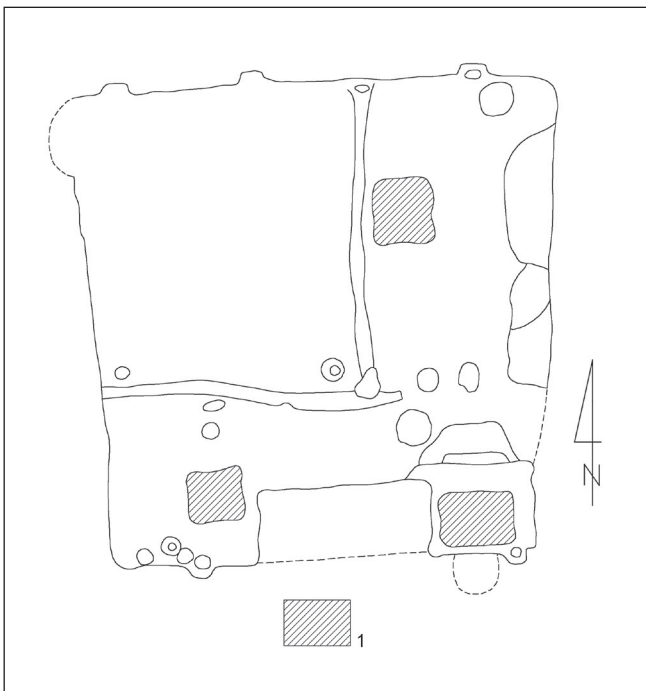


Fig. 10. Ancient Nikonion. Dugout no. 6. 1 – fired clay. After Sekerskaya 1989. Drawing by E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik.

supports were used. This is good confirmed in dugout no. 1 at Nadlimanskoe – the holes for pillars were placed by each narrow wall<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Dzis-Raiko et al. 2012, 45.

In the floor small holes 0,05 m in diameter and 0,05 m deep, fullfilled black soil were also recovered. They show existence of the wattle construction dividing interior of the dwelling.

An oval (1,20 m W-E, and 0,75 m N-S) hearth was located in the southern a part of the dwelling (Figs. 6 and 8). It was organized on a platform, 0,50 m high above the floor<sup>35</sup>. The base of the hearth was formed by convex fragments of amphora placed directly on the sand, bulge part up (Fig. 9). All was covered by clay. For construction of the hearth fragments of one Chian amphora with red strips painted in upper part were used. The amphora had a defect and was not good to use for liquids, as is suggested by traces of being repair. It has been fractured by the reason of the defect.

A hollow in front of the hearth was fullfilled ash, sherds of handmade ceramics and fish bones.

On the clay-covered floor fragments of Ionian ceramics dated to the first half of the fifth century BC were found. A bottom of the Ionian vessel has a graffito – letter Π in Archaic form<sup>36</sup>. Two coins were also discovered. Both are bronze cast pieces. One is an Istrian coin with the wheel on the obverse and ΙΣΤ on the reverse<sup>37</sup>. This coin is dated

<sup>35</sup> As in dugout no. 1 at Nadlimanskoe – Dzis-Raiko et al. 2012, 47.

<sup>36</sup> On graffiti from Nikonion for instance Golovko 1961; Golovko 1966.

<sup>37</sup> In the „semi-dugout” registered as no. 5, dated to similar period as dugout no. 196, 12 Istrian cast coins were found between two layers of clay covered floor – Andrunina 1970, 236.

to the middle of the fifth century BC<sup>38</sup>. Istrian coins has formed a base of local coin circulation in Nikonion<sup>39</sup>. On the base of these coins were produced local currency – as Nikonion emission are treated cast coins imitating Istrian ones. Olbian coins were also found in Nikonion. At the city were cast coins interpreted as emissions of Scythian king Scyles<sup>40</sup>. The second coin is save very badly, the attribution is not clear – Istrian piece or may be coin of Scyles?<sup>41</sup> Bones of the fish were also found. The archaeological material explored in the dugout no. 196 is similar to be found in other dwellings.

The archaeological evidence confirms that the dugout no. 196 was used in the first half of the fifth century BC. It also suggests that the dugout has been left in the middle of the century BC.

A particular position among houses dug into the ground occupies dugout no. 6<sup>42</sup>. The dugout (Fig. 10) was probably the oldest sanctuary at Nikonion<sup>43</sup>. It has area of 25,5 sq. m,

and the floor has been found 1,25 m below the ground level. The house was divided (this opinion is based on the evidence from the floor) for two rooms (one of them is saved only in a small part). The smaller, north-western room had an area of 8,0 sq. m.

The dugout was fulfilled mud bricks. Below bricks in the „big room” parts of Chian, Lesbian and Thasian amphoras as well as fragments of Ionian fineware ceramics, including kylikes were found. In the south-eastern part of the room a rectangular (0,98x1,00) platform 0,21 m high was recorded. Its surface was covered by ashes. The platform was rounded by mud bricks. Following to archaeological inventory and the analogy from Olbia<sup>44</sup>, the dugout had been described as having religious character.

Houses of religious character dated to the second half of the fifth century BC were not registered at Nikonion. From the middle of the fifth century BC houses dug into the ground were replaced by above-ground houses.

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<sup>38</sup> SNG London, 223-224.

<sup>39</sup> Zaginailo 1966; Zaginailo 1991; Zaginailo and Sekerskaya 1992; Sekerskaya and Bulatovich 2010; Mielczarek 1999; Mielczarek 2012. In relations to Tyras and Bulatovich 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Zaginailo 1990; Zaginailo 1993; Zaginailo and Karyshkovskii 1990; Mielczarek 2005; Mielczarek 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Three possibilities can be taken under note: Istrian „wheel”, Nikonion local imitation of Istrian pieces, coin of Scyles – for literature see note 40.

<sup>42</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 25-29, 96-98.

<sup>43</sup> Sekerskaya 1989, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Kozub 1976. See also Buiskikh 2001.



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**Streszczenie**

**Ziemianki w antycznym Nikonion nad dolnym Dniestrem**

Ziemianki lub półziemianki były charakterystyczną formą zabudowy w najstarszej fazie istnienia kolonii greckich na północnym wybrzeżu Morza Czarnego. Od Istrus na zachodzie, po miasta bosporańskie na wschodzie. Rejon dolnego Dniestru zdominowany był przez dwie *poleis* – Nikonion oraz Tyras. Do ostatniego trzydziestolecia IV w. p.n.e. przodującym ośrodkiem było Nikonion.

Na terenie Nikonion odkryto ponad 20 ziemianek. Rozrzucone są one na całym obszarze grodziska kryjącego pozostałości antycznego miasta. W zdecydowanej większości zostały one zdewastowane przez rzekę, niszczącą grodzisko oraz przez fundamenty, budowanych od połowy V w. p.n.e. domów oraz ich piwnice. Ziemianki były użytkowane od czasu założenia miasta (koniec VI lub sam początek V w. p.n.e.) po połowę V w. p.n.e.

Ziemianki odkryte w Nikonion zbudowano na planie prostokąta, niekiedy „prostokąta o zaokrąglonych narożnikach”. Nie ma wśród nich typowych dla *chora* pomieszczeń na planie koła lub owalu. Ziemianki mają powierzchnię od 11 do 40 m<sup>2</sup>. Wśród nich jest obiekt, któremu przypisuje się funkcję kultową.