

Tumular Burials in Thrace and Moesia Inferior and the Tumuli in other European Provinces

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"When speaking about barrows, one could say: "That sort of burial was known all the world over..." - that is how Dr. M. Amand began, 36 years ago, a paper of his dedicated to the Roman time burial mounds in Belgium¹. The Early Roman Imperial Period witnessed a bloom of the habit of piling up tumuli. The subject is being lively discussed among the European archaeologists. General surveys are available now on Britain², Belgium³, Trier region⁴ as well and partly on Austria⁵ and Hungary⁶. All those surveys stress on the actual outburst of tumular burials along the Northern border of the Empire. Unfortunately, only some of them just briefly mention Moesia Inferior and Thrace referring to now fairly old publications⁷. That is why a general review of the essential problems related to the Roman Age tumular burials in nowadays Bulgaria, in my opinion, is an immediate and topical task.

More than 200 Roman Imperial Period tumular necropolis have been registered in Bulgaria, many of them partly or completely studied. Most of them comprise three to five or frequently much more barrows. The number of the tumuli themselves certainly exceeds 1000. Just for comparison, the highest number cited for the tumuli in Belgium I have come across in the publications is 350⁸. The numbers of the tumuli in the provinces of Moesia Inferior and Thrace correlate in 1:2.5 proportion. Yet the number of the tumuli in Thrace that have been fully or partly excavated, or at least some information is available about their chronology and characteristics dramatically exceeds the number of those in Moesia Inferior.

The distribution of tumuli in Moesia could hardly be correctly defined because of the southern provincial border shifts till the end of the 2nd c. A.D. Not all of the burial mounds in the Balkan mountain region and to the North of it have been precisely enough dated to be ascribed with certainty to one of the provinces. Anyway Dobruja as well as the Lom, Yantra, Osum and Vit rivers' basins are occupied by a considerable number of barrows.

The tumuli in Thrace are relatively evenly distributed at a generally very high density. Nevertheless some regions can be pointed out, like Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Kyustendil, etc. where the burial mounds are especially numerous. This fact could be partly due to the current state of the field studies but possibly it is directly linked to the settlement system's specificities as well. What is the most important for Thrace in that aspect is that it is the only inner Imperial province of a so high tumuli concentration.

What is undeniable is that the map of Bulgaria is densely dotted with tumular necropolis and the only real blank is the NW Bulgaria, to the west of the Vit river, comprising the westernmost part of Moesia Inferior and the NE territories of Moesia Superior, which might be due to some ethnic and economic reasons.

In Thrace as well as in Moesia Inferior burial mounds represented an integral part of the settlement system being practically related to all the types of settlement units. Especially splendour are the tumular necropolis associated with the villas which is not difficult to explain with the economic power and the social position of the owners.

The empirical data collected up to the end of the 60's had been processed and summarized by Prof. L. Getov in his PhD thesis⁹. He put forward not only the primary problems concerning the Roman Age barrow burials but also pointed out the main trends in the burial rites nature and evolution. Most of them are still being confirmed by the constantly increasing new data.

The Roman barrows in Central and NW Europe are almost always associated with cremation burials. On the contrary, tumuli in Moesia and Thrace cover cremations as well as inhumations. Both modes of burial were practised in parallel although with different temporal intensity. Prof. Getov noticed the marked predominance of cremation during the 1st and the 2nd centuries and its gradual replacement with inhumation by the end of the 3rd c. This is confirmed by the new results of the excavations and it has to be only added that the cremation did not completely died out till the very end of the period being regularly practised in the Rhodopes mountains region in the 4th c. as well. It should be mentioned that after the beginning of the 3rd c. biritual necropolis and even biritual barrows were not exceptions. Both types of cremation burials i.e. incineration in situ (*bustum* type) and at a separate place called *ustrinum* are known from Roman age tumuli¹⁰. The statistic analysis of the data from Bulgaria shows that the *bustum* type burials prevail decisively against the *ustrinum* type cremations. The percentage of the *bustum* graves in Moesia Inferior is 64.3 and for Thrace it is 68. The regular occurrence of cremation burials especially at the beginning of the period is usually explained with preservation of local Iron Age traditions and it is considered to be one of the features of the Thracian ethnicity. Without rejecting such a statement, I think that for a thorough clarification of the origin and nature of the Roman Age incineration it should be also considered that cremation was the common practice in all the European provinces as well as in Rome itself, so the interexchange with other peoples and regions as well as the impulses from the centre should not be ignored. Generally speaking, the monocentric approach to the question of the Roman Period cremation origin does not seem to be the appropriate one. It is considered that the shift to the inhumation was due to Roman influence which sounds reasonably enough having in mind how massive that shift was in the Empire.

The barrow burials in Central and NW Europe show relative uniformity concerning the grave construction. The cremated remains were usually inurned in a clay vessel or a lead box, or were just left on the floor of the grave. Frequently there were wooden or tile structures. The tumuli in Moesia Inferior and Thrace on the other hand provide magnificent variety of grave constructions. It seems in general that the Roman Age barrows reveal the same groups of grave structures, known from Pre-Roman time, i.e pits, platforms, chambers built of stones or bricks, more or less representative tombs as well as sarcophagi. Urns of various types and some wooden structures seem to have been of auxiliary importance. Each of the above groups comprises several types of grave constructions of the relevant kind. Practically, all kinds of sepulchral structures were utilised for cremation as well as inhumation burials. However, some partiality has been observed for certain types of structures use for the different modes of disposal. For example, pits and platforms were preferred for *bustum* graves and the pits' subtypes rank as follows: stair-profiled pits (60.6%), rectangular pits (31%) and oval pits (8%). The so called stair-profiled pits are not common beyond Thrace and Moesia Inferior and they seem to be a result of local evolution and to represent a specific Thracian sepulchral structure. Pits, platforms, built graves and tombs had a long history of local evolution, while the roof-tile constructions, sarcophagi and the lead boxes were inspired by a tradition foreign for the Thracians which was possibly the reason why they did not actually gain popularity in Moesia and Thrace.

The grave goods represent another primary component of the burial rites. This is probably the aspect in which Thracian burial mounds show the closest affinity with their counterparts in Central and NW Europe. Grave offerings composition does not differ essentially. It comprises first of all vessels of clay, bronze and glass, pieces of jewellery and ornaments, weapon, toilet articles and coins. Imported objects occur commonly and the difference usually concerns only the production centres. The Roman Imperial Period resurrected the habit of performing rich burials and the reason for that should be economic as well as cultural. Tumuli in Thrace containing chariots and equine skeletons as well as the so called "doctors' graves" represent a special subject of study and should be thoroughly reconsidered.

Together with the graves many tumular embankments in Thrace and Moesia Inferior cover a series of other structures that could not be directly interpreted as sepulchral by nature. Such are the stone and pottery accumulations, ritual pits, hearths, stone rings surrounding either graves or mounds. Their existence seems to be rooted in the Pre-Roman period. Their place is searched within the complex context of the Thracian ritual system.

Tumuli in Pannonia, Noricum, Gallia Belgica and Britannia are dated mainly in the 1st and 2nd centuries. The habit of piling tumuli in Moesia Inferior and

Thrace was gathering strength in that period and reached its climax respectively by the middle and by the very end of the 2nd century, after which it commenced to decline. Tumuli piled in the fourth century has not been attested in Moesia Inferior and they were common in Thrace only for the Rhodopes region whose general evolution seem to have been quite conservative and a bit retarding. On the other hand, tumuli were still widely used in the 4th, 5th and sometimes even 6th centuries for performing secondary inhumation burials.

While the reasons for the fresh outburst of the barrow burials in Western Provinces are still discussed and the revival of Bronze Age and sometimes La Tène traditions is equally argued together with the influence coming from Rome, the matter does not need to be much debated so far as the Thracian areas are considered. Filling tumular embankments in nowadays Bulgaria had thousands of years lasting tradition and notwithstanding the decline in the 2nd and the 1st centuries B.C., it seems not to have been actually interrupted.

The present briefing on the Roman Imperial Age tumuli in Moesia Inferior and Thrace and the comparison with the contemporary barrows in other European provinces, although sketchy, in my belief, show that Moesia Inferior and Thrace occupied an equal position within the burial rites system of the Empire and at the same time reveal a range of specificities evolving from many centuries lasting local development.

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NOTES

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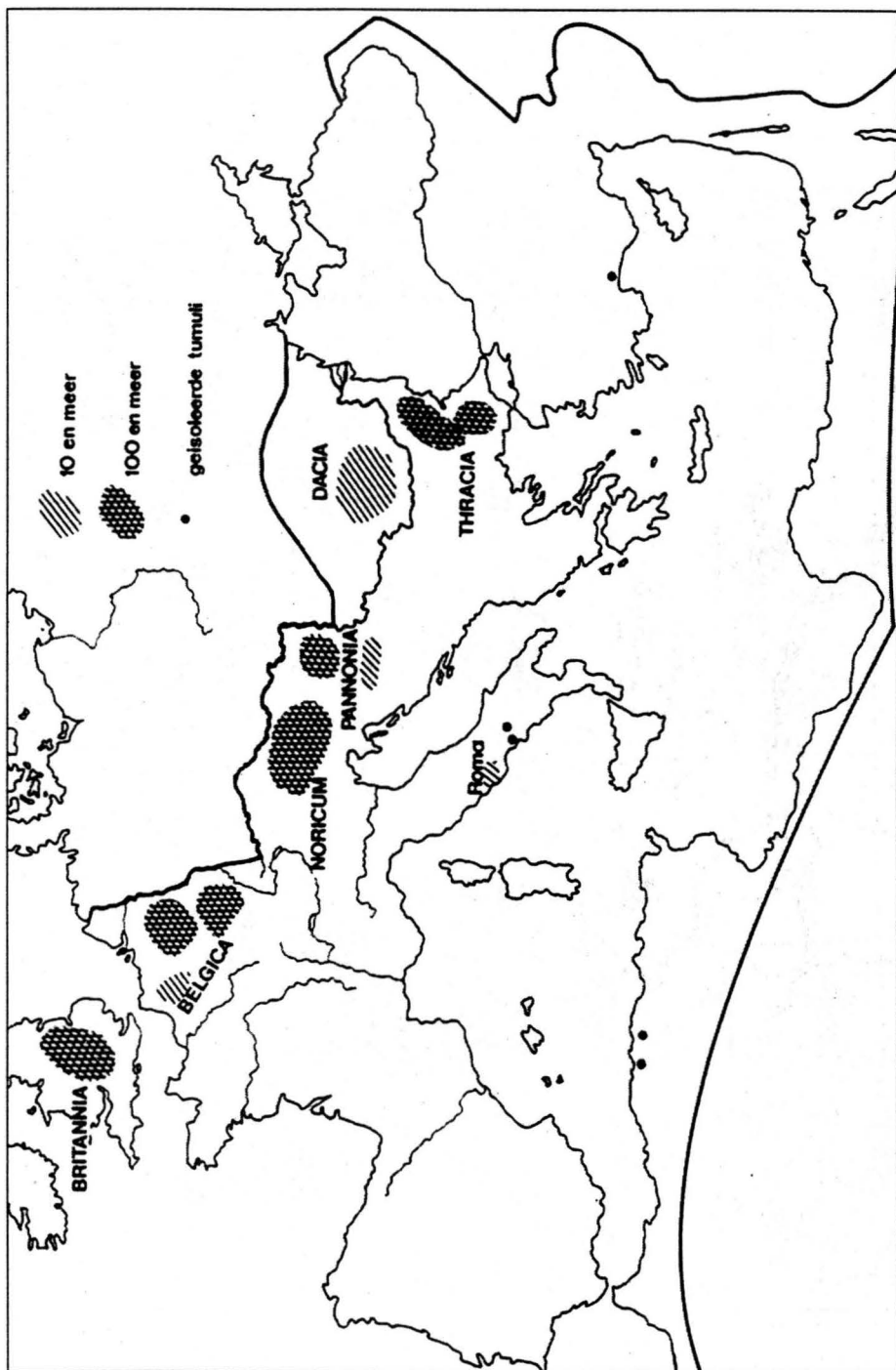
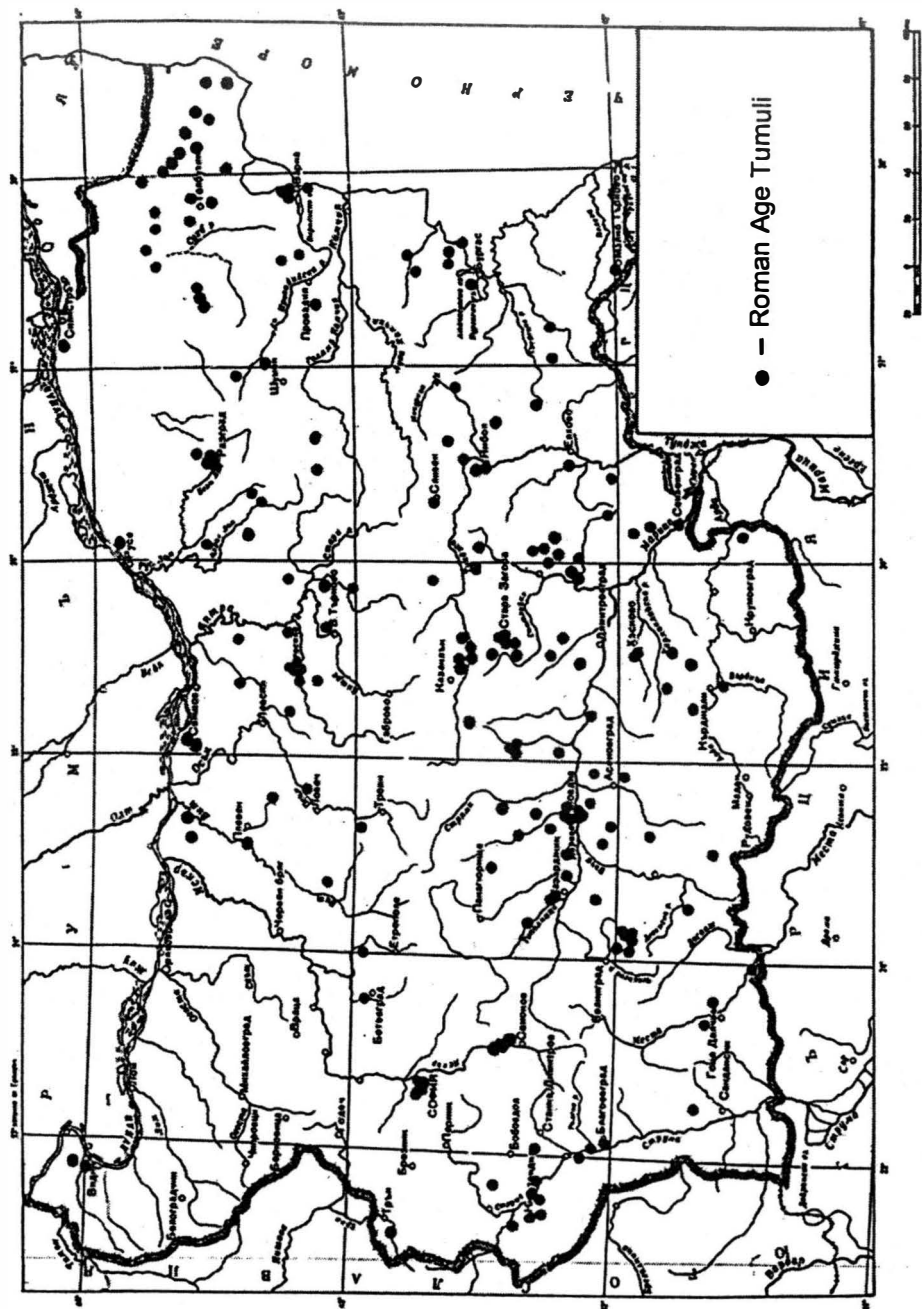
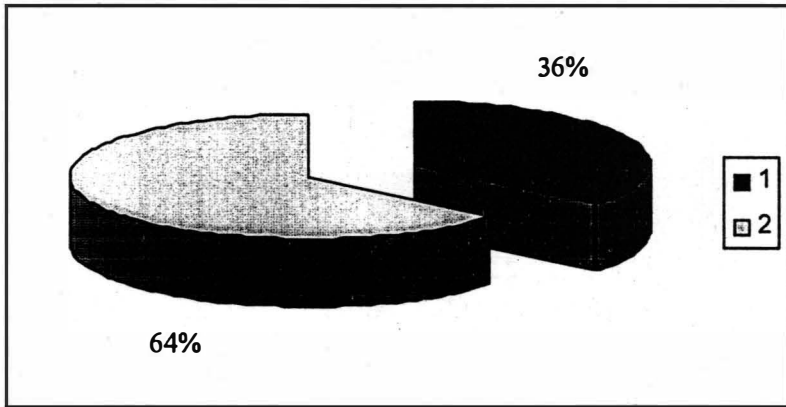


Fig. 1 (After M. Amand 1986).

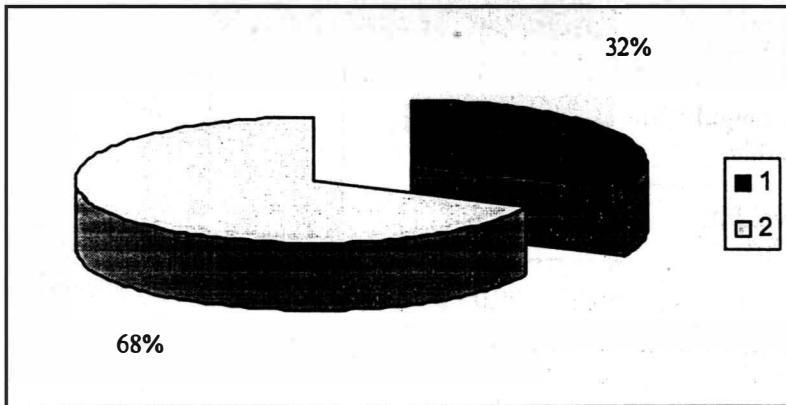


CREMATION BURIALS

Moesia Inferior



Thrace



1 - *Bustum*

2 - *Ustrinum*

Fig. 3

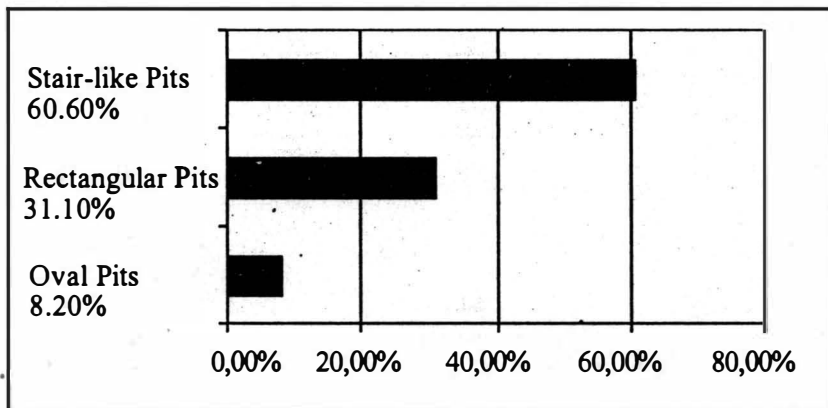
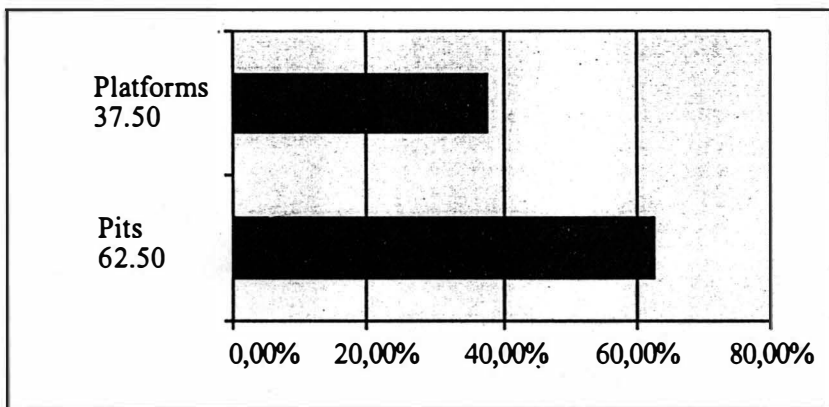
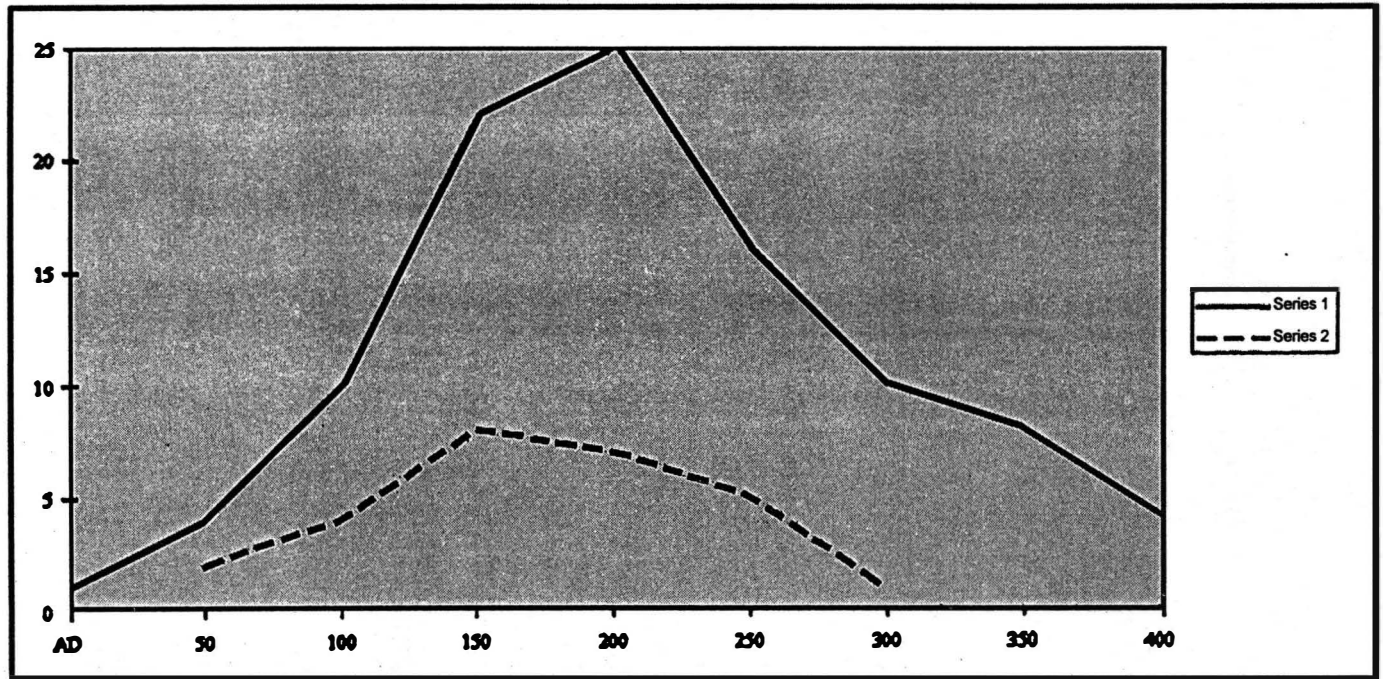


Fig. 4

TUMULI IN MOESIA INFERIOR AND THRACE



Series 1 - Moesia Inferior

Series 2 - Thrace