

TMUTOROKAŃ: THE FORGOTTEN PRINCIPALITY



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T'MUTOROKAÑ—THE FORGOTTEN PRINCIPALITY

Generally, knowledge concerning T'mutorokañ (also Tmutorokañ, Tmutarakañ, today Tamañ) is rather limited. There are quite a few works on Eastern European history that do not even mention T'mutorokañ.¹ However, because of its strategically and geopolitically very important location on the eastern shore of the Tamañ Peninsula in the Kerch Strait,² it was coveted by all the imperial powers which sought to control the access routes from the Black sea to the Azov sea, as well as the trade routes on the Kubañ, Don, and the Volga rivers.

The first known inhabitants of this region were the Cimmerians.³ In the *Odyssey*, XI, 13-19, Homer mentions the region of the future T'mutorokañ with the following words:

We came at last to the deep stream of Oceanos which is the world's boundary.
There is the city of the Cimmerian people, wrapt in mist and cloud. Blazing
Helios never looks down on them with his rays, not when he mounts into the
starry sky nor when he returns from sky to earth; but abominable night is forever
spread over those unhappy mortals.⁴

Besides this rather mythical reference, we know very little of the Cimmerians. They are also mentioned by Herodotus in his famous *History* from the Vth century BC and in the Assyrian cuneiform chronicles. In the VIIth century BC they captured the empire of Urartu (probably Armenia). Then they penetrated towards the West and captured the kingdom of Lydda where King Gydes was ruling. After some time they penetrated even into Ionia, but were defeated, and their remnants fled to Cappadocia. After this event there is no further historical mention of the Cimmerians. However, they managed to leave behind on both sides of the *Bosporos Kimmeri(k)os*⁶ several names that attest to their indisputable presence, e.g. the city and mountains Kimmerion,⁷ the village Kimmerike,⁸ the region Kimmeria, the Cimmerian wall and Cimmerian ford. In the seventh century BC the remnants of the Cimmerians were driven out partially by the Scythians, and partially by the Sindians. In the sixth century BC these Sindians founded their city of Hermonassa⁹ on the site where some thirteen centuries later T'mutorokañ emerged.¹⁰

The Sindians were a highly diversified society. They occupied themselves with farming, cattle raising, fishing, trade and commerce. They also constructed a state with the capital of Sindica. However, they very soon became mixed with Greeks and Sarmatians and in the IVth century BC were incorporated into the Bosporos empires. ¹¹

Hermonassa, the first city on the Tamañ Peninsula known by name, was located on the site of the present large Cossack village or *stanycia* of Tamañ. After Phanagoreia, ¹² it was for a long time the second richest city on the eastern shore of the *Bosporos Kimmerios*. Systematic excavations have been conducted since the 1950's under the leadership of I.B. Zeest. ¹³ These have led to the discovery on the site of the fortified town of remnants of a marble frieze with representations of giants. The frieze was part of the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, which was constructed by local craftsmen. A buried treasure of golden Bosporos coins from the fourth century BC was discovered. Attached to Hermonassa was a sizeable necropolis or burial mound in which was discovered a marble sarcophagus from the IVth century BC in the shape of a Greek temple. In the first centuries AD Hermonassa played an important part as a trade centre between the Bosporos empire and the Alani tribes, the alleged forefathers of the contemporary Eastern Slavs. Therefore it must have had a mixed ethnic population. We have no information on when Hermonassa fell into the hands of the Eastern Slavs. However, it is quite possible that the attack of the so-called "Ruotsi" on the New Rome or Constantinople in 626 was made from a naval base at the former Hermonassa, which by now assumed such names as Tmutorokañ, Tamatarkha, Tamarkha, and Matrakha. ¹⁴

There can be no doubt that the vicinity of the Khazar empire played an important political and cultural rôle, for Antes and Slavs who lived on both sides of the *Bosporos Kimmerios* organized in a state called the Kaganate of Ruś as an ally of the Khazar Kaganate. This new state is known from its attacks on the Byzantine possession on Crimea in the VIIIth century. Also the attacks of "Ruotsi" on the New Rome or Constantinople in 860 and 907 were initiated from T'mutorokañ, or at least that the Kaganate of Ruś with a capital in T'mutorokañ took part in these campaigns along with other Slavic tribes and loosely organized states. ¹⁵

One of the earliest witnesses concerning the existence of the Kaganate of Ruś is the Arabic writer Omar Ibn Rusta from the Xth century, who in turn based his accounts on the writings of al-Džaihani, Vizier of the Samonides who wrote in the year 301 of Hejira (i.e. 913-14 AD). In turn, al-Džaihani based himself on the sources of the middle of the IXth century, now lost. ¹⁶

Omar Ibn Rusta begins his interesting account with the following information:

Russia is an island around which is a lake, and the island in which they dwell is a three days' journey through forests and swamps covered with trees and it is a