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The Center for
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Research on the consequences of violations of international humanitarian law in the field of protection of cultural property:

ANCIENT CITY OF TAURIC CHERSONESE AND ITS CHORA

Research on the consequences of violations of international humanitarian law in the field of protection of cultural property: The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora.

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The material was prepared with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation within the framework of the project “Synergy of Methodologies and Results of Analytical Work on Remote Monitoring of Cultural Heritage Sites. A Pilot Study of the Site ‘Tauric Chersonese and its Chora’”. The material reflects the position of the authors and does not necessarily coincide with the position of the International Renaissance Foundation.

The International Renaissance Foundation is one of the largest charitable foundations in Ukraine. Since 1990, we have been helping to develop an open society based on democratic values in Ukraine. During its activity, the Foundation has supported about 20,000 projects, which were joined by more than 60,000 activists and organizations from Ukraine. The funding amounted to over \$ 200 million.

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Photo on the cover: The Basilica of 1935, photo by Andrii Butko

Graphic design: Yana Demchenkova, Ania Leskova

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The images used for this brochure and the models created as part of the project were taken from open sources. The use of intellectual property materials was carried out in compliance with the requirements of the current legislation of Ukraine in the field of copyright protection.



*To the descendants who will one day come here
and see what has been preserved or destroyed.
So that they know that history is not only the past
but also the future that we are creating now*



✦ INTRODUCTION

The study was prepared at the joint initiative of the Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS) and the Center for Spatial Technologies (CST) with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation within the framework of the project “Synergy of Methodologies and Results of Analytical Work on Remote Monitoring of Cultural Heritage Sites. A Pilot Study of the Site ‘Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora’”.

This study demonstrates the possibilities of remote monitoring as an effective tool for analyzing the condition of sites that cannot be accessed for various objective reasons, including the UNESCO World Heritage Site located in the temporarily occupied territory of Sevastopol (Ukraine).

The methodology of remote monitoring of the state of protection of cultural heritage sites, developed by the CISS (the most seasoned organization in Ukraine in this field), is applied by the organization’s monitoring group to collect data on the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation, namely in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, certain districts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Spatial modeling technologies make it possible to visualize objects lost as a result of illegal archaeological works, estimate the total area and volume of excavations and determine the degree of impact of new construction on the historical landscape. An archive of media evidence is created around the identified zones/sites/objects, including video and photo materials from open sources, reports by Russian state media, scientific publications, conference materials, maps and satellite images, etc. Based on the collected data and their precise geolocation, a digital archive is created that enables detailed analysis of sites and objects and the calculation of 3D models based on the collected media materials. Illustrative materials and chronologies developed on the basis of satellite images record the changes that have occurred as a result of the works.

The methodology and tools of the CISS, combined with the spatial modeling technology developed by the CST, made it possible to investigate violations of international humanitarian law in the field of protection of cultural property during armed conflict (in accordance with the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and its Protocols (1954 and 1999), particularly as regards illegal archaeological research, destruction of immovable cultural property and misappropriation of movable and immovable cultural property on the territory of the “Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”.

AS PART OF THIS COOPERATION, TWO MODELS WERE CREATED:

1 a photogrammetric model of the “Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”, which serves as a model for calculating the work to be done and demonstrates its scale.

<https://chersonese.spatialtech.info/city>

2 a model-reconstruction of a separate object, the ancient columbarium on the territory of the Necropolis, which demonstrates in detail the changes that the area between the Chersonese gully and the defensive walls of Chersonese has undergone, and also introduces specific objects: the columbarium and the exedra, which were dismantled and destroyed as a result of illegal excavations in 2020–2023.

<https://chersonese.spatialtech.info/temenos/>



✦ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Tauric Chersonese is a valuable monument of history and archaeological site. Founded by the Greeks in the 5th century BC, the city existed for about 2,000 years. Today, Chersonese is one of the largest ancient centers in the Northern Black Sea region and is also a cornerstone of Crimean history.

On the one hand, it bore witness to the penetration of civilization into Crimea and the way it transformed the local barbarian environment into a genuine ancient society. This is a story about the real Hellenes, the power of Roman emperors and legions and Byzantine intrigues.

On the other hand, Chersonese is a case of the great creative potential of the autochthonous people and evidence of their ability to borrow the best from other peoples without losing their own flavor. The history of Chersonese is the story of the Cumans with their steppe culture in its very heart, the artisanal blocks; it is the story of the Proto-Bulgarians who penetrated deeply into the Byzantine bureaucracy and nobility; it is the story of the autokrators of Mangup who sought to breathe life into the almost dead city.

This remarkable and at the same time complex history of the ancient city is lost in the classical sense: time has deprived us of its chronicles.

Therefore, it is the archaeological research of Chersonese that is the only complete source for studying its historical past.

During its existence, Chersonese suffered at least one large-scale decline: around the 11th century, when its territory was catastrophically reduced to such an extent that a large pottery workshop was located in front of the main church of the entire Chersonese metropolis (usually such craft centers were located on the outskirts). Chersonese lost its urban appearance somewhere in the first half of the 14th century. However, in the 15th century the castle of the Theodoro autokrators was located on its territory, which in the medieval society of southwestern Crimea symbolized the unbreakable historical connection and political continuity between Chersonese and Mangup. After experiencing its last rise and prosperity in the 12th and 13th centuries, the ancient city went into a complete decline at the end of the 14th century.



Despite the total destruction of all settlements, amazing ruins and a marina remained on the site of the ancient city dating back to no later than the third quarter of the 15th century (these ruins of Chersonese went down in history as Jerizona), they existed until the end of the 18th century, until the founding of Akyar, i.e. Sevastopol.

“

It was from this moment that the final process of the destruction of Chersonese began, which was inextricably linked to the beginning of the colonial penetration into the territory of the former Crimean Khanate, captured in 1783.

The strategic desire of the Russian Empire to integrate the heritage of Chersonese into its own historical narrative was intended to legitimize its presence in Crimea by artificially identifying it with the ancient and Byzantine traditions.

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Today, the ancient city of Tauric Chersonese is a 42-hectare cape surrounded by a defensive wall with a single complex of suburban infrastructure on the shores of the modern Quarantine Bay in Akyar (Sevastopol).

One of the most important and phenomenal sites is the Necropolis. This is a unique, large-scale funeral complex, where burials were carried out for about 2,000 years. The study of this Necropolis makes it possible to trace the process of transformation of funerary rites and traditions, which reflected the worldview and religious life of the townspeople, the economic well-being, ethnic composition and many other factors of the city’s history throughout its existence¹. Given the information available today, the Necropolis of Chersonese surrounds the city from all sides, forming its historical landscape.

It should be noted that a significant part of the suburban area and the nearby agricultural district (chora), which are of exceptional scientific interest, are located outside the territories of sites of national and local importance, outside their protection zones, outside the UNESCO site and its buffer zones, and, unfortunately, are blocked by the continuous urban development of the Haharinskyi district of the city of Akyar (Sevastopol).



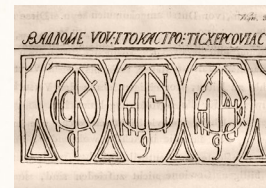
Beginning of the XI century

Urban crisis



Second half of the XIII century

The rise of the city
in Late Byzantine times



Middle of the XV century

The castle of autocrats
of Theodoro



1475

The final destruction
of the city

✦ INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION OF THE TAURIC CHERSONESE NATIONAL PRESERVE (UKRAINE) (1993–2013)

Since 1993, the territory of Chersonese and its objects have been the focus of international research projects. As a result of this cooperation, the Tauric Chersonese National Preserve (Ukraine) became the main research center of the ancient city and established its own scientific archaeological school.

1

1993



Ukraine – USA

Study of the synagogue in the northern district of Chersonese

2

1994-2013



Ukraine – USA

Research and conservation on the territory of the Chersonese chora

3

1999-2010



Ukraine – Republic of Poland

Scientific cooperation and holding annual international conferences on religious studies at the reserve

4

1997-2001



Ukraine – Republic of Poland

The early-byzantine church architecture of Chersonese

5

2001-2013



Ukraine – Republic of Poland

Research and conservation of three city blocks, Byzantine churches, a basilica, and a water catchment cistern-prison in the center of the site

6

2001-2008



Ukraine – USA – Italian Republic

Research and conservation of a residential area in the southern part of Chersonese

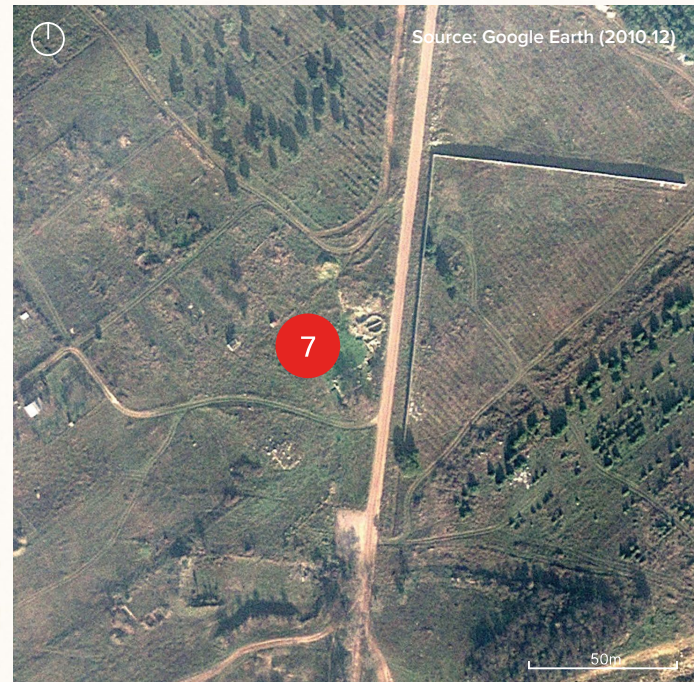
7

2010-2013



Ukraine – Republic of Poland

Research of the land plots nos.341-343 of the chora of Tauric Chersonese, Research of the Blyzniuky estate, plot no.343



Locations of international projects

✦ THREATS TO THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE DURING OCCUPATION (2014–2025)

In February 2014, in deliberate violation of the principles and norms of international law, the Russian Federation launched an armed aggression against Ukraine. As a result, Ukrainian territories were occupied, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol and certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Cultural heritage sites found themselves under threat of destruction.

Timeline of actions by Russia and its proxies regarding the World Heritage Site “The Ancient City of Chersonese and its Chora”

**Before
2014**

Chersonese
National Preserve

2014

The occupation authorities of Sevastopol

Unlawful appropriation of the property complex of the Tauric Chersonese National Preserve and its transfer to the occupation institution of the so-called State Budgetary Institution of Culture of Sevastopol “Tauric Chersonese National Preserve”



Sergey Menyailo
the so-called governor
of Sevastopol

2015

Government of the Russian Federation

Alienation of the property complex to the Russian federal ownership, creation of the so-called State Budgetary Institution “Tauric Chersonese National Preserve”



Dmitriy Medvedev
Prime Minister
of the Russian Federation



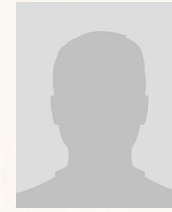
Timur Ivanov
Deputy Minister of
Defense of the Russian
Federation



Sergei Shoigu
Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation

Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation

Incorporation of the southern part of the buffer zone of the World Heritage Site “The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora” with an area of 13 hectares (in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, a large Necropolis and the “pottery ceramic district” were found on this territory) for the construction of a complex consisting of museum infrastructure (administration, ancient, medieval and Christian halls), buildings of the Artek children’s camp, secondary and art schools and a hotel complex



Nikolay Savin
Director-General
of the Military
Construction Complex



Ivan Yesin
head of the My
Story Foundation

2016

Ministry of Culture
of the Russian Federation

Inclusion in the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects (Historical and Cultural Sites) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation(1)

2020

2020-2024

Foundation for the Support of Humanities “My Story”, Patriarchal Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Military Construction Complex of the Russian Ministry of Defense

Illegal excavations “for demolition” of objects on the territory of the Necropolis. Construction of the New Chersonese complex



Vladimir Medinsky
Minister of Culture
of the Russian Federation



Sergey Solovyov
a researcher at the Department
of Archaeological Protection of
the Institute of History of
Material Culture of the Russian
Academy of Sciences



Viktor Vakhoneev
senior researcher at the Underwater
Archaeology Group of the Institute
of History of Material Culture of the
Russian Academy of Sciences



Sergey Obryvalin
First Deputy Minister
of Culture of the Russian
Federation

Appropriation

Until 2014, the Tauric Chersonese National Preserve was the balance holder of the territory of the World Heritage Site “The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”. In 2014, the occupation authorities of Sevastopol illegally appropriated the property complex of the national preserve. Later on, it was transferred to the occupation institution, the so-called State Budgetary Institution of Culture of Sevastopol “Tauric Chersonese National Preserve”. In 2015, the property complex was alienated to Russian federal ownership, to the so-called Federal State Budgetary Institution of Culture “Tauric Chersonese State Historical and Archaeological Museum-Preserve”.

In 2016, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation included the complex site “The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese” in the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites (Historical and Cultural Sites) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation under the title “The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese”

(registration No.921520336350006)

<https://opendata.mkrf.ru/opendata/7705851331-egrkn/57/356870>.

Объект	Номер в реестре	Регион	Полный адрес	Категория историко-культурного значения
Вашни XV – XV*	921620336350216	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь, ул. Древняя	Федерально значения
Вашни XX и XXI*	921620336350106	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь, ул. Древняя	Федерально значения
Береговые батареи № 12 и № 13	921721298360005	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь, Территория государственного национального заповедника «Херсонес Таврический»	Регионально значения
Древний город Херсонес Таврический	921520336350006	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь	Федерально значения
Древний город Херсонес Таврический и крепости Ченбало и Каланита	921831316180006	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь	Федерально значения
Минная станция	921711507500005	г. Севастополь	г. Севастополь, территория национального заповедника «Херсонес Таврический»	Регионально значения

Screenshot from the website of the Unified Register of Immovable Monuments of the Russian Federation

Illegal archaeological excavations

Starting in 2015, the occupying Russian authorities began to use Chersonese to form their own myth about Russia’s connection with Great Romania (better known as Byzantium). Neglecting the history of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, they turned the territory of the preserve into an entertainment facility with a theater. During this period, under the slogan of “modernization,” capital improvement projects were implemented both at the site itself (2018 – Necropolis in Tower I and peribolos in Zeno’s Tower; 2019 – Citadel) and in the immediate surrounding area (2016 – the western section of the Necropolis; 2017 – the section of the Necropolis near PISOCHNA Bay; 2019 – the Cemetery of All Saints or the section of the Necropolis on Maiden’s Hill; 2020–2021 – the section of the Necropolis in the Chersonese gully).

The greatest losses to the archaeological heritage of Chersonese were caused by illegal “excavations” “for the demolition” of its Necropolis in 2020–2024,

when Russian archaeologists were tasked with clearing the site for the construction of an entertainment complex called “New Chersonese”. The main purpose of such actions is to strengthen the narrative of the “cradle of Orthodoxy” and promote a historical concept that “justifies” Russia’s claims to Crimea, in particular through the construction of the myth of the peninsula as a “no-man’s land,” which, in turn, serves as an ideological justification for Russia’s “right to a dominant role” in the region.

As a result of the illegal search for ancient sites, the archaeological work of the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereinafter referred to as IHMC RAS), which has been conducted since 2022 on the territory of the Necropolis of the ancient city of Tauric Chersonese, has virtually led to the neglect and loss of medieval layers of the 13th–14th and 15th centuries

During the period of 2021–2024, according to the occupation administration, 85,000 square meters of the cultural layer were destroyed, about 4 million objects and more than 1,500 archaeological complexes were seized². The collection of finds of museum value reached 360,000 items that have not yet been transferred to the funds of the so-called Tauric Chersonese State Historical and Archaeological Museum-Preserve (created by the Russian authorities during the appropriation of the property complex and collections of the Tauric Chersonese National Preserve) within the occupation records system (State Catalog of the Museum Fund of the Russian Federation).



Illegal excavations of the Necropolis of Tauric Chersonese, 2020

Particularly valuable funerary complexes, such as the Roman columbarium, the tombs of Ariston and Anion, and the tomb with exedra and Hellenistic funerary sites, including monumental structures around individual sarcophagi, were removed from the historical landscape.

Destroyed during illegal archaeological excavations “for demolition,” the Chersonese blocks in the port area are considered in historiography to be the last centers of life in the city. However, their upper, most recent layers were severely damaged (almost destroyed) by the Russian military department in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Therefore, despite the presence of lapidary finds with the coats of arms of the rulers of Theodoro (which were eventually lost by museum workers), cultural layers of the 15th century have not been discovered in Chersonese. The question of the presence of the Theodore Fortress in Chersonese remains open, as does the question of the Theodorites’ affiliation with this ancient city. This creates a gap in our knowledge of the history of southwestern Crimea, which prevents us from tracing the continuum between Chersonese and the Crimean Khanate, the suzerain of the Mangup rulers, as evidenced by the study of their material culture.

The southern suburb of Chersonese is located as close as possible to the port block and are its continuation, so until 2020, there was hope that by using modern methods of thorough excavations under the military barracks it would be possible to discover the Theodoric Chersonese. But now it is clear that a significant part of these layers has been destroyed by Russian bulldozers and excavators. The occupation realities are such that the “authorities” tasked with the protection of cultural heritage are more motivated to free the territory from the site as such than to preserve and museumize it. This organically fits into the policy of erasing the ancient history of Crimea and replacing it with Russian colonial narratives.

It can also be stated that the preserve created by the occupation authorities has lost its scientific archaeological school, which was decades in the making.

The Russian archaeologists from the IHMC and the State Hermitage Museum, who contributed to this, at some point tried to replace the Chersonese specialists but later lost interest in the site.

Projects for the economic development of the territory of Tauric Chersonese

Such projects include the Opera in Chersonese project. Within its framework, a stage and an open auditorium are set up every summer on the territory of the Citadel and the Port Quarters, and theatrical lighting and sound equipment are installed. Such structures are gigantic not only in comparison to the ancient and medieval ruins of city estates and defensive walls but also in comparison to the monumental St. Volodymyr's Cathedral (built in 1892), which looks like a small toy when compared to them.



Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, and Tikhon Shevkunov, Chairman of the Patriarchal Council for Culture (right), during the opening of an art school in Chersonese, March 18, 2023

The so-called “rescue restoration” projects

In 2018, the western defense wall in the Citadel was “restored” in a short time. However, the excessive haste of the work and its localized character raise reasonable doubts about the compliance of such restoration measures with scientific standards and their ability to eliminate the threat to the preservation of archaeological sites during the festival.

“

Thus, despite the fact that such measures of the occupation authorities were aimed at forming an impression of the preservation and popularization of the site, they led to a change in the historical landscape, a change in the scale of perception of the Chersonese archaeological complex.

”

Illicit removal of cultural property

In February 2023, the Kamiana Mohyla National Preserve, located in the Russian-occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region, was illegally added to the so-called Tauric Chersonese State Historical and Archaeological Museum-Preserve as its branch.

The occupation authorities moved more than 100 exhibits to Tauric Chersonese, and in May, an exhibition with 120 artifacts opened there, including petroglyphs, household items, pottery and Stone Age tools. In September, a second exhibition entitled “The House of Fish on the Sacred Mountain of Kamiana Mohyla” was presented. The actions of the occupation administration indicate the systematic transfer and use of cultural property from the occupied territories, which is contrary to international humanitarian law, in particular the provisions of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954 and its Protocols. Such actions can be qualified as illicit removal of cultural property and perceived as a violation of the right of the population of the occupied territory to preserve and access their own cultural heritage.



✦ INTERFERENCE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE: THREATS TO PRESERVATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

We observe active interference on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as the ROC) in the activities of the preserve, which is aimed at seizing its territory. The first attempt was made in 2015, when the “governor of Sevastopol” appointed by the occupation authorities, Sergey Menyailo, appointed Archpriest Sergey (Khalyuta) as director of the occupation administration. This immediately created a threat to the authenticity of the site as the church administration prioritizes the religious exploitation of the territory over its comprehensive scientific protection.

The second attempt was made on February 15, 2024, when Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Crimea of the Russian Orthodox Church, proclaimed during a service on the territory of the cultural heritage site “The Basilica of 1935 – Synagogue” the creation of a monastery within the territory of 1923³. Already on March 12, 2024, this decision was approved by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Metropolitan Tikhon was appointed abbot of the monastery⁴.

Not only does this decision contradict international standards for the protection of cultural heritage, but it also poses significant risks to the preservation of the site, its authenticity and the archaeological environment. Moreover, it is part of a much broader policy: the destruction of the historical and cultural ties of the occupied territory with its rightful owner, Ukraine.

Threats of restrictions on scientific activity and possible loss of cultural layers and archaeological sites as a result of the transfer of Chersonese to the monastery.

The transfer of the Chersonese hillfort to the monastery will have significant negative consequences for scientific research and preservation of the site.

According to Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Simferopol and Crimea of the Russian Orthodox Church, on February 15, 2024, the territory transferred to the monastery will be separated from the rest of Chersonese by a fence⁵. As early as November 2024, the occupation authorities of the Chersonese Preserve initiated an examination of the project for its construction. The media in Sevastopol also draw attention to the obviousness of introducing significant restrictions within the territory of the monastery⁶. First of all, this will concern scientific excavations, which will obviously be carried out in a reduced format as the main goal will be to legalize the release of the territory necessary for the monastery, which will lead to the complete destruction of cultural layers and archaeological sites. Another important negative consequence will be the restriction of access to the part of the hillfort that will become the property of the monastery. Some parts of Chersonese may become completely closed to the public, with access only for members of the monastic community. The Metropolitan explicitly pointed to this in his public statement⁷. Such changes will greatly complicate the study, protection and preservation of the archaeological heritage of Chersonese.

Threats to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site “Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora (Ukraine)”

TRANSFER OF CHERSONESE TO THE RUSSIAN CHURCH



Scientific accessibility

- Prohibition of excavations
- Archaeological legalization of destruction
- Access restrictions
- Denying access



Construction activity

- Illegal construction work at the sites
- Destruction of ancient sites
- Economic development of the territory



Pilgrimage instead of scientific and educational activities

- Changing historical narratives
- Propaganda



Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Basilica of 1935 monument in Chersonese on February 15, 2024

Threats from the economic and construction activities of the monastery.







The analysis of the observed activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Crimea over the past ten years demonstrates a high probability of vigorous construction activities of the monastery, both through the construction of new capital structures within the archaeological quarters of the site and the reconstruction of existing facilities, in particular those of religious significance, namely churches, chapels, basilicas and medieval monasteries. The laying of utility lines on the territory of the hillfort will also lead to irreversible losses for the site⁹. The consequence of such processes will be not only the destruction of the archaeological heritage but also the elimination of the authenticity of historical objects.

It should be noted that ancient buildings and sites belonging to other religious traditions may be at risk of destruction since their preservation will not be in line with the new concept of development of the territory. Such an approach could lead to a distortion of the historical context of Chersonese and the destruction of its multilayered cultural landscape.

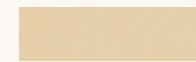
Thus, the construction and economic activity of the monastery poses potential risks to the preservation of the historical, cultural and scientific component of the heritage of Chersonese.

The extent of the threats described above is confirmed by the damage to certain intra-complex facilities recorded as of November 2024, which was also caused by the activities of the monastery.

In particular, the following objects were destroyed:

 The defense walls, along with the Southern Gate and the proteichisma,	 Block 7 with Byzantine baths and a water catchment cistern-prison of the 9th and 11th centuries,
 The Necropolis of Tauric Chersonese (part of the territory included in the lot “Ancient city of Tauric Chersonese”),	 Early Christian basilicas No. 28 of the 6th–7th centuries and No. 29 near St. Volodymyr’s Cathedral,
 The Agora and block 45 with the early Christian basilica No. 17,	 Block 72.

The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese. Map of the blocks and the boundaries of the monastery.



Quarters of Tauric Chersonese, where the museum continues to function



Quarters of Tauric Chersonese, which are threatened by the functioning of the monastery



The territory of the ancient city Chersonese, which is claimed by the monastery



The defensive walls



The boundaries of the part of the UNESCO site "The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora" Part no. 001 "The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese"

✦ RESULTS OF REMOTE MONITORING OF THE WORLD HERITAGE SITE TAURIC CHERSONESE

The CISS, which monitors the state of protection of cultural heritage sites in the temporarily occupied Crimea using remote monitoring tools, has recorded more than 85 cases of illegal archaeological research conducted by Russian archaeologists in the agricultural part of Chersonese and on the territory of the settlement itself; 34 of them were carried out directly on the territory or in the buffer zone of the components of the World Heritage Site “The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”.

In this brochure, the authors focused on the reconstruction of violations against cultural property at three locations:

Total number of cases

85 illegal
archaeological
research

_____ of which _____

34 on the territory
of the UNESCO
World Heritage Site

Locations of violations

Location 1.

Chersonese Necropolis, partly included in the UNESCO site and partially located in its buffer zone.

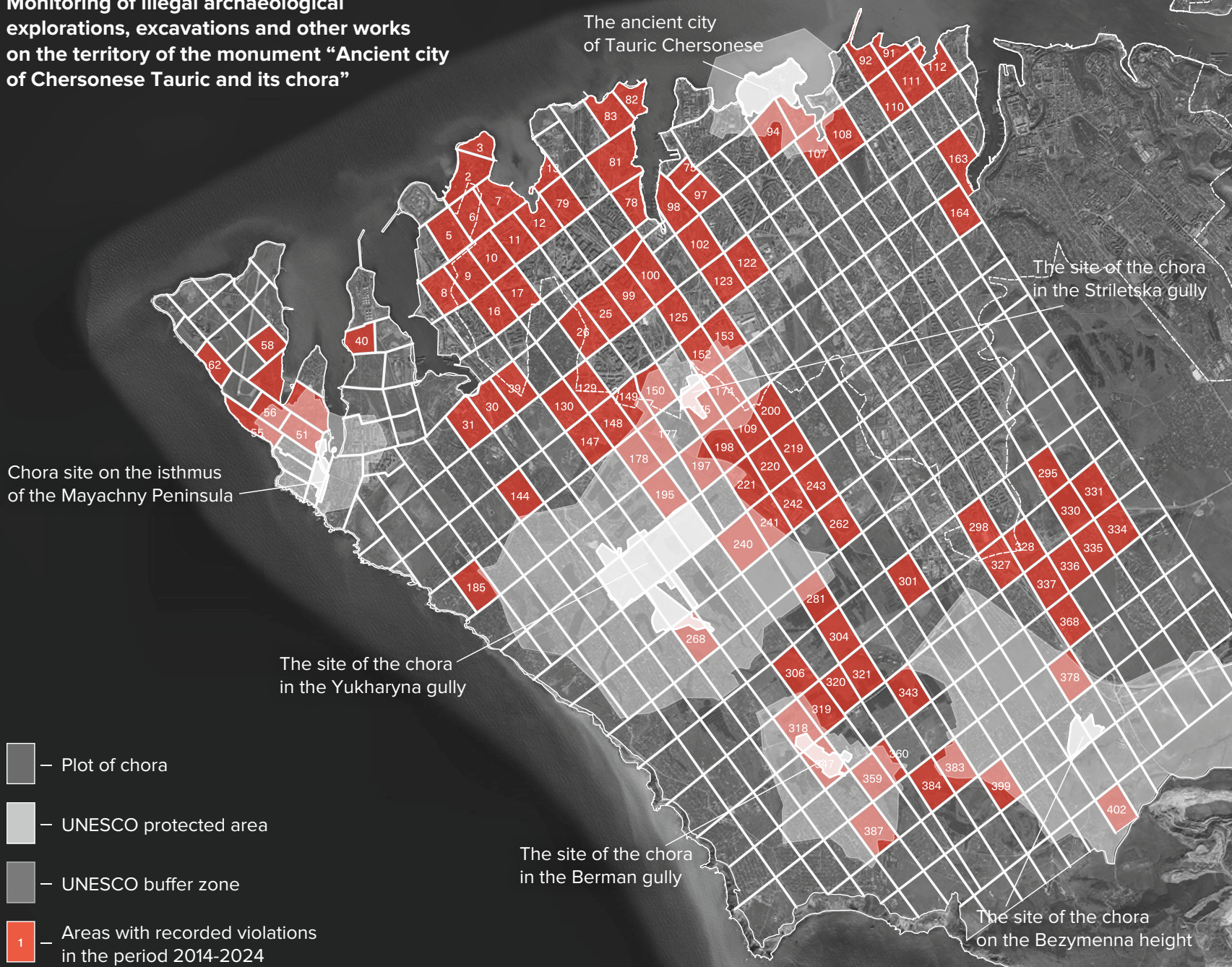
Location 2.

The Southern Gate, the street and blocks 71 and 72 beyond it, the 45th block with the Agora and Basilica No. 17, located entirely within the UNESCO site.

Location 3.

Blocks 7, 11, 11a in the central part of the city, located entirely on the territory of the UNESCO site.

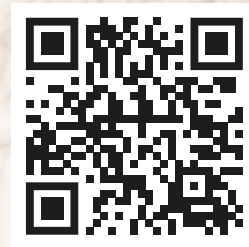
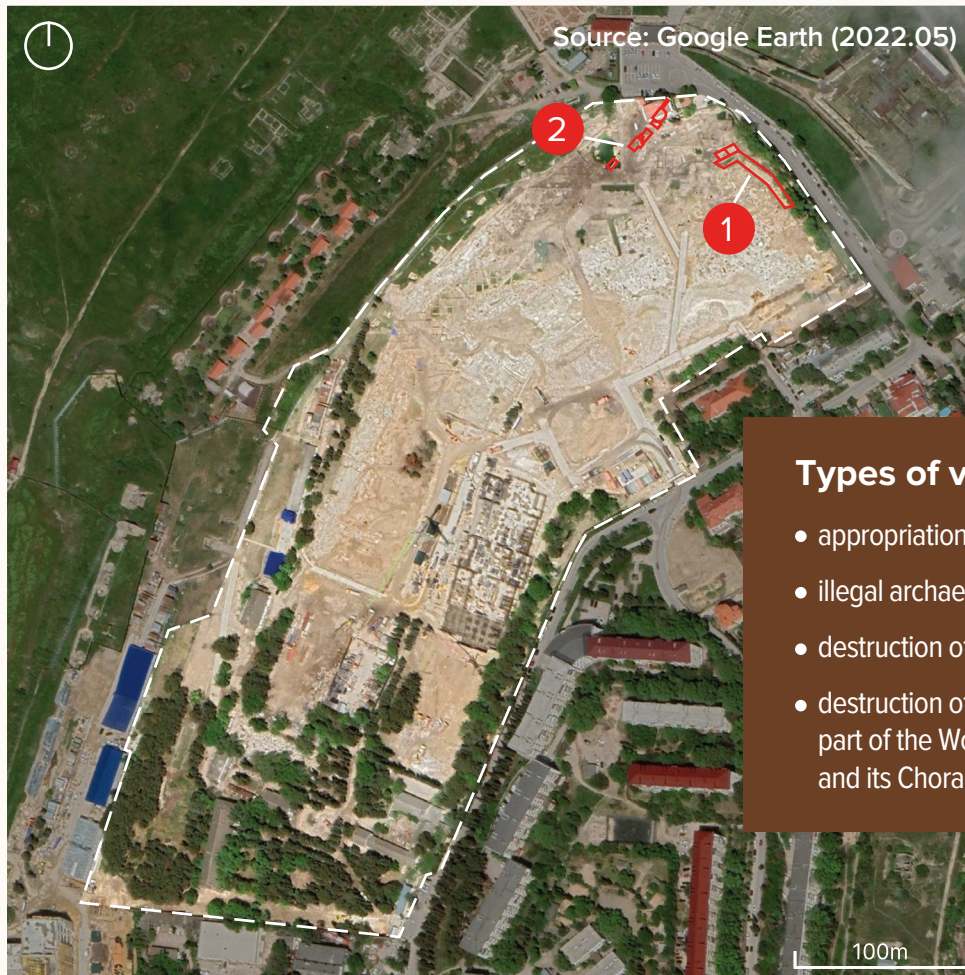
Monitoring of illegal archaeological explorations, excavations and other works on the territory of the monument “Ancient city of Chersonese Tauric and its chora”



✦ LOCATION 1: CHERSONESE NECROPOLIS

Object 1. The Ancient Road.

Object 2. A burial complex in the Roman section of the Necropolis.



See a detailed model here

Types of violations:



- appropriation of immovable and movable cultural property,
- illegal archaeological excavations,
- destruction of immovable cultural property,
- destruction of the historical landscape of the Central (first) part of the World Heritage Site “Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”.

OBJECT 1. THE ANCIENT ROAD

The Ancient Road was found to be 81.4 m long with an average width of 3.7 m (ranging from 3.5 (12 Roman feet) to 4.15 (14 Roman feet) m) and consisted of two parts separated by a turn of almost 90° counterclockwise:

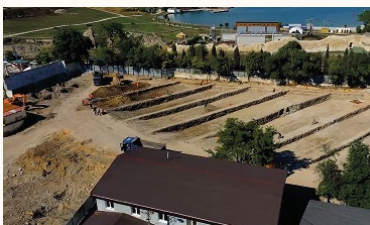
- The first part was located at the bottom of the Chersonese gully and had a reconstructed length of 16 meters.
- The second part of the road was recorded on the southeastern slope of the Chersonese gully and was 65.4 m long.

From the technological standpoint, the road was typical for the two sites (with minor differences due to different construction periods): it was a trench in the cultural layer at least 1.5 m deep; the sides of the trench were lined with large, slightly polished stones, and the space between the trench sides was filled with medium and large broken stones using architectural details. This road embankment was constructed with a lime-clay binder mortar. The part of the road on the southeastern slope of the Chersonese gully is preserved better, almost completely. Only the roadway slabs were missing. A drainage ditch can be traced in this part. It dates back to the period from the 4th century BC to the 11th century AD.

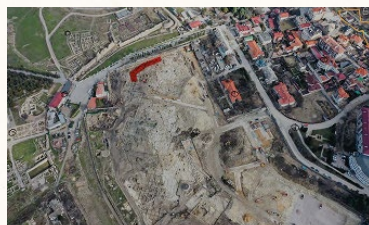
Direct analogies to the Ancient Road on the Chersonese Necropolis can be found on the western Necropolis of the ancient city of Assos⁹ (Republic of Türkiye) and the Necropolis of Athens. Similar ancient roads in terms of construction technology are known in Crimea above the village of Skelia in the Baidar Valley and on the Fiolent massif between Bezimennyi and Lermontova capes.

The earliest construction horizon includes well-crafted rusticated blocks of the roadway lining near a funerary structure with a sarcophagus (the “heroön” object) of the late 4th century BC. Apparently, this is the oldest part of the Ancient Road. Here it was laid along the thalweg (the line of the lowest points of the bottom of the gully) of the Chersonese gully, and before the defensive walls it probably turned northwest, climbing the slope to the Hellenistic gates of Chersonese, dating from the 4th century BC.

At the end of the 1st and beginning of the 2nd century, the road route was changed. From then on, to access the Necropolis, it was necessary to cross the newly erected peribolus (the space between the inner and outer defensive walls) with the proteichisma (the outer defensive wall) and exit through the gate in the proteichisma located near Zeno’s Tower. During this period, new road surfaces were formed over the Hellenistic burial complex with the sarcophagus.



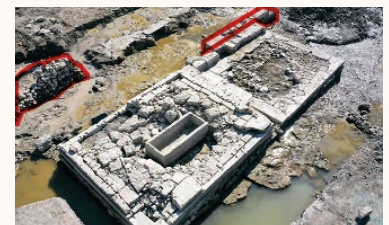
Trenches made by heavy construction equipment in the cultural layers of the Middle Ages and Modern Times at the Necropolis of Chersonese



The Ancient Road (marked in red) on the Necropolis of Chersonese



The Ancient Road. Illegal archaeological excavations. The first half of April 2022



A burial structure with a sarcophagus from the Hellenistic period and the Ancient Road near it. The surface of the Hellenistic road and the remains of the Ancient Road are marked in red.

Despite the published similar archaeological sites identified as roads (located very close, 100 meters from the territory of the Citadel, excavations by V. V. Borysova, and in front of the Western Gate of the city, excavations by A. V. Mahda), this object was not interpreted by the authors of the illegal archaeological research as a historical road.

Its obvious continuation in the thalweg of the gully was not recorded in any way. The object was categorized as a “defensive wall”. Three dating options were proposed for it: 5th–6th centuries, late 10th century, early 11th century.

The explanation for the complex chronology of the site and several construction horizons is to be found in the complex geological (weak underlying soils in the form of clay, silt, and waterlogged garbage fills), hydrological (high groundwater table) and seismic (over the seismic fault of the Chersonese gully) conditions of the site. All of these natural factors combined to cause the road to wear out and require constant repairs. Obviously, this complex stratigraphic situation was not taken into account or recorded by the authors of the illegal excavations.

The Ancient Road was completely dismantled during the illegal excavations. In its place, a three-story monumental concrete building, the Museum of Antiquity and Byzantium, was erected.

2021.10



2022.05



2022.06



OBJECT 2. THE BURIAL COMPLEX IN THE ROMAN SECTION OF THE NECROPOLIS

The site was located on the northwestern slope of the Chersonese gully. It was built on the foundations of a Hellenistic structure stretched along the slope. According to the data obtained during the illegal excavations, it dates back to the period from the turn of the 1st/2nd to the 5th centuries.

The funerary complex on the Roman section of the Necropolis was united chronologically, planographically and topographically: a road ran along its front northwestern façade, preserving its direction ever since the Hellenistic times. The general direction of the road was from the Hellenistic gate and further along the slope. After the gate was moved and the proteichisma was built, this road was not abandoned, and the Necropolis section with it acquired the features of a privileged one.

The first object located along the road was a funerary structure with an exedra. It was a family tomb with slab graves, in which both lead urns with ashes and graves with bones in a stretched-out position were found. The names Dioscurus and Nardion were discovered on two lead urns. Stone benches were installed over the graves in the exedra for a memorial trizna.



The columbarium, slab tombs with stelae of Ariston and Annon. Illegal excavations

The next object was a platform with stairs paved with stone slabs. It formed a crossroads: a “lane” began from it, which departed from the longitudinal road on a slope and went down into a gully to the Ancient Road described above.



The exedra. The floor and stone benches dismantled during illegal excavations

A large burial complex was located immediately further on. Its centerpiece was a well-preserved monumental columbarium with mostly unlooted burials. The street continued along the Necropolis, bounded by a small stone fence.

The last object in the complex is a slab tomb with a stylobate (Object 6) dating from the late 1st or early 2nd centuries AD. Inside the tomb, five levels of burials were recorded: urns with ashes from cremations and skeletons from inhumations. The burial complex in the Roman section of the Necropolis functioned until the late Roman period. At the end of its existence, the exedra and columbarium were damaged: their facades facing the bottom of the gully fell out. After that, the entire complex was covered with a leveling embankment. During the leveling, Ariston’s tombstone was not dismantled or covered, although this was done to Annon’s stele.

This monument stood above the surface for a certain period. Over time, under the influence of gravity and the general movement of the soil (probably in the 4th and 5th centuries), Ariston's stele began to break and shift until it finally collapsed.

The funerary complex in the Roman section of the Necropolis was illegally excavated in 2022–2023, partially dismantled and moved to a new location for museum display.

It is fair to argue that there has been a serious methodological error in the organization of archaeological research and museification of the site. It has to do with decisions on the relocation, restoration and dismantling of individual parts of the burial complex in the Roman section of the Necropolis without prior full discovery of the site. This made it impossible for the organizers of the illegal excavations and representatives of the occupation administration to provide a proper professional assessment of its scientific and cultural significance, level of preservation and unique value, which, in turn, rendered it impossible to determine reasonable goals and objectives for its museification.

The columbarium was moved in 2022, the exedra was discovered and moved in 2023. The slab tomb with a stylobate (object No. 6) was damaged during illegal excavations in 2022. The reasons for this methodological error should be viewed through the lens of the purpose of the illegal excavations themselves. Their goal was not to preserve cultural heritage sites but to quickly vacate the construction site in accordance with engineering and construction needs. As a result, even when museified and preserved in a new location, some objects of the funerary complex in the Roman section of the Necropolis lost their authenticity, structural integrity and connection with the historical landscape of the “Necropolis of Tauric Chersonese” and the ancient hillfort as a whole.

Also in 2024, the proteichisma and the Southern Gate were severely damaged, along with the ancient buildings in the area of the ancient theater. They were partially dismantled during the laying of communications for gas, water and heating supply for the monastery's facilities on the territory of the Chersonese hillfort.

The ancient hillfort lost its panorama after the construction of the three-story monumental concrete building of the Museum of Antiquity and Byzantium.

As a result of the works on the territory of the Necropolis of Tauric Chersonese and the creation of the buffer zone in the UNESCO site from 2021 to 2024, the historical landscape was completely destroyed. The landscape-forming objects on the territory of Chersonese, which were interconnected with the Necropolis and also formed its historical topography, were either partially dismantled and lost their original integrity or lost their panoramic view against the background of new monumental buildings. Thus, the historical landscape of the site “Ancient City of Chersonese and its Chora” in the area of the Chersonese gully has been completely lost.

1. The eastern wall
2. The exedra
3. The square
4. The mausoleum with a platform
5. The slab tomb with stelae of Ariston and Annion
6. The columbarium
7. The slab tomb with a stelobate

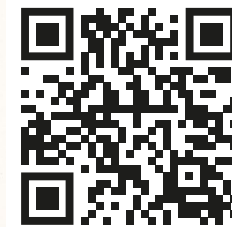


2023.06

✦ LOCATION 2. THE SOUTHERN GATE, THE STREET AND BLOCKS 71 AND 72 BEYOND IT, THE 45TH BLOCK WITH THE AGORA AND BASILICA NO. 17

Object 1. The defensive walls with the southern gate and the Eastern defensive structures near the Quarantine Bay.

Object 2. Agora and block 45 with the early Christian basilica No. 17.



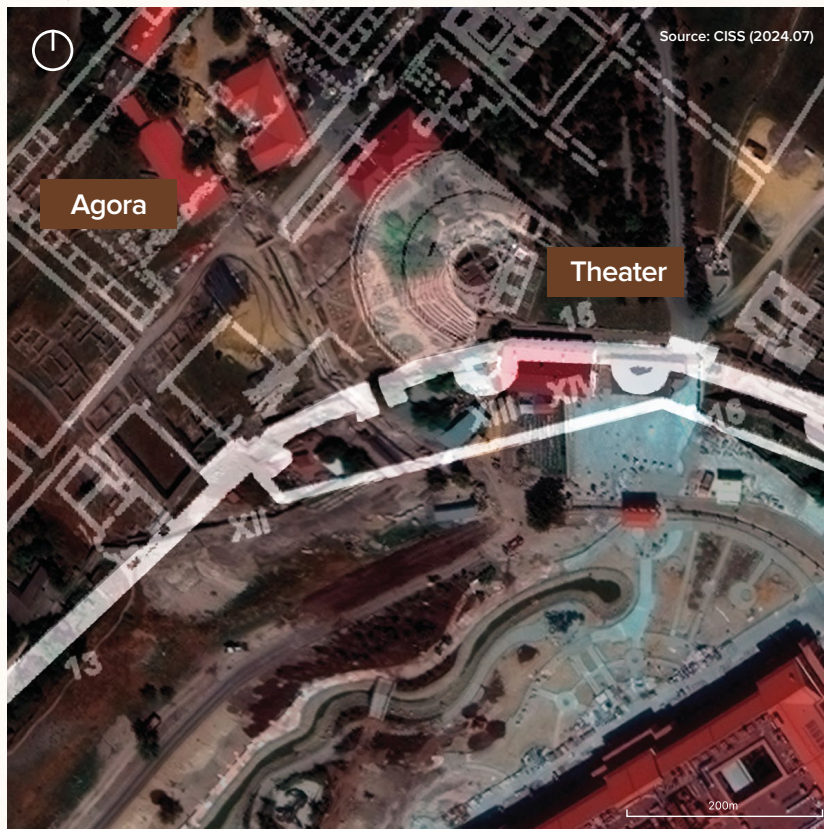
See a detailed model here

Type of violation:



- appropriation of immovable and movable cultural heritage sites,
- illegal archaeological excavations,
- destruction of immovable cultural heritage sites.

OBJECT 1. THE DEFENSIVE WALLS WITH THE SOUTHERN GATE AND THE EASTERN DEFENSIVE STRUCTURES NEAR THE QUARANTINE BAY



2024.07

The southeastern defensive walls were erected in Hellenistic period at the end of the 4th century BC. From this time, only the lower rows of masonry, built of powerful rusticated blocks without mortar, and the southeastern city gate have survived. In the 9th and 10th centuries, the city's level was raised, with the ancient walls being placed underground and used as a foundation in the Byzantine defense system.

From the outside, the ancient defensive walls of Chersonese were fortified with semicircular towers located at a distance of an arrow's flight. The largest of the Chersonese towers was Zeno's Tower, built at the turn of the 3rd/2nd centuries BC to cover the southern flank of the citadel and the port of Chersonese. Initially its diameter was 8 m; in the 9th and 10th centuries it reached 23 m in diameter.

In the early years of the Christian era, the southeastern line of defense of Chersonese was further strengthened by the front wall, the proteichisma. The space formed between the two walls, the peribolus, was a “stone trap” for those who would fall into it during the siege of the city. In addition, the front wall did not allow the wall-breaking devices to breach the main defensive structures.

To ensure the strength of the defensive walls in Roman and Byzantine times, they were built using limestone mortar with an admixture of crushed ceramics. In the Byzantine period, the walls were additionally reinforced with rectangular towers on the outside.

This complex of sites is interesting from the point of view of studying the processes of continuity and dynamics of changes in fortification traditions between Roman and Byzantine times.

Between December 2023 and July 2024, illegal excavations were carried out with the complete dismantling of exposed cultural heritage sites. The fact that the cultural layer was damaged is confirmed by the results of retrospective, cartographic and geographic information analysis. The length of the trench illegally excavated in 2023–2024 on the territory of this site is 57 m; the total area of damage is at least 114 m².

Retrospective and cartographic analysis: the site was investigated in 1890–1892 and in 1896 by K. K. Kościuszko-Waluszyński, founder and first director of the Chersonese Museum in Sevastopol. Archaeological work plans from 1900, satellite images and photographs from the summer of 2024 show that the curtain wall 14, tower 13 and the proteichisma in front of them, the street and the buildings of the blocks along and adjacent to the gate were destroyed.



The theater, the Church with the Ark and the Ancient Hall. Tauric Chersonese National Preserve before the occupation of Crimea in 2014.



The area of the Southern Gate of Tauric Chersonese. Illegal excavations carried out to free up land for the laying of utility lines to the buildings transferred to the Monastery. Summer 2024.

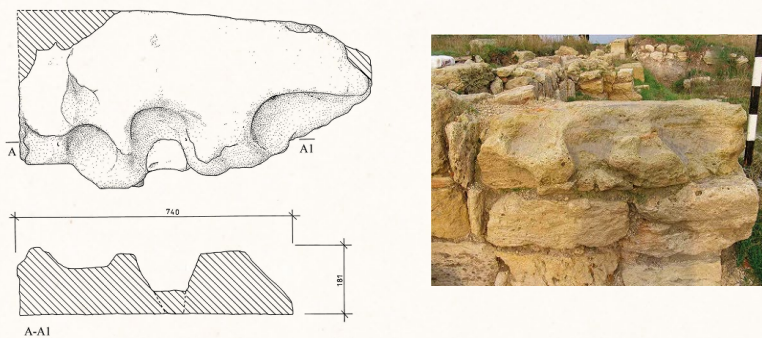


The trench 2024 for laying utility lines (in red), block boundaries (yellow and red lines) and archaeological plans based on the results of excavations of the 19th–20th centuries.

OBJECT 2. AGORA AND BLOCK 45 WITH THE EARLY CHRISTIAN BASILICA NO. 17

The Chersonese agora was located on the site of block 45 and covered an area of 65.3x130.7 m. The closest analogue of the site is the Agora in Priene¹⁰ (Republic of Türkiye).

From the beginning of the 3rd century BC to the end of the 4th century AD, the Chersonese agora was an open rectangular stone-paved square inside the quarter. Along the perimeter of the block there were the premises from which the stone masonry in the foundations of medieval buildings has been preserved. In 2010-2013, within the framework of the Ukrainian-Polish research project, two fragments of the mensa ponderaria limestone (a device for controlling the volume of liquid and loose products sold) were discovered in quarter 45.



Mensa ponderaria from the excavations of the 45th block

Between 395 AD and the second half of the 5th century, Basilica No. 17 was built in the southeastern part of the block, measuring 25.81 by 19.60 meters. The apse had a pentagonal shape on the outside and a semicircular shape on the inside. In 2010-2013, two chapels and a city manor house were also discovered, which probably served as a ptochotrophium¹¹. Basilica No. 17 functioned until the early 15th century, and is one of the few material evidences of urban life in Chersonese during this period. The basilica was uncovered in 1827 and excavated in 2010-2013 by the Ukrainian-Polish research team.

Between December 2023 and July 2024, illegal excavations were carried out with the dismantling of exposed objects. The fact of damage to the cultural layer is confirmed by the results of retrospective, cartographic, and geographic information analysis.

Retrospective and cartographic analysis: The site was surveyed by K. Kruzo in 1827, K. K. Kościuszko-Waluszyński, the founder and first director of the Chersonese Museum in Sevastopol, in 1900, O. Klenina (Tauric Chersonese National Preserve, Ukraine) A.B. Biernacki (Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, Poland) in 2010-2013. The length of the trench illegally excavated in 2023–2024 on the territory of the site is 69 m, and the total area of damage is at least 138 m². Archaeological work plans from 1900, satellite images (2024) and photographs (2024) show that the objects of medieval, Roman and Hellenistic times were damaged.



The 45th block. Earthworks for laying utility lines to the buildings transferred to the Monastery. 2024

45th Quarters and Agora



2024.07

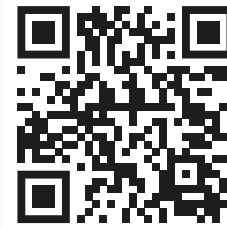
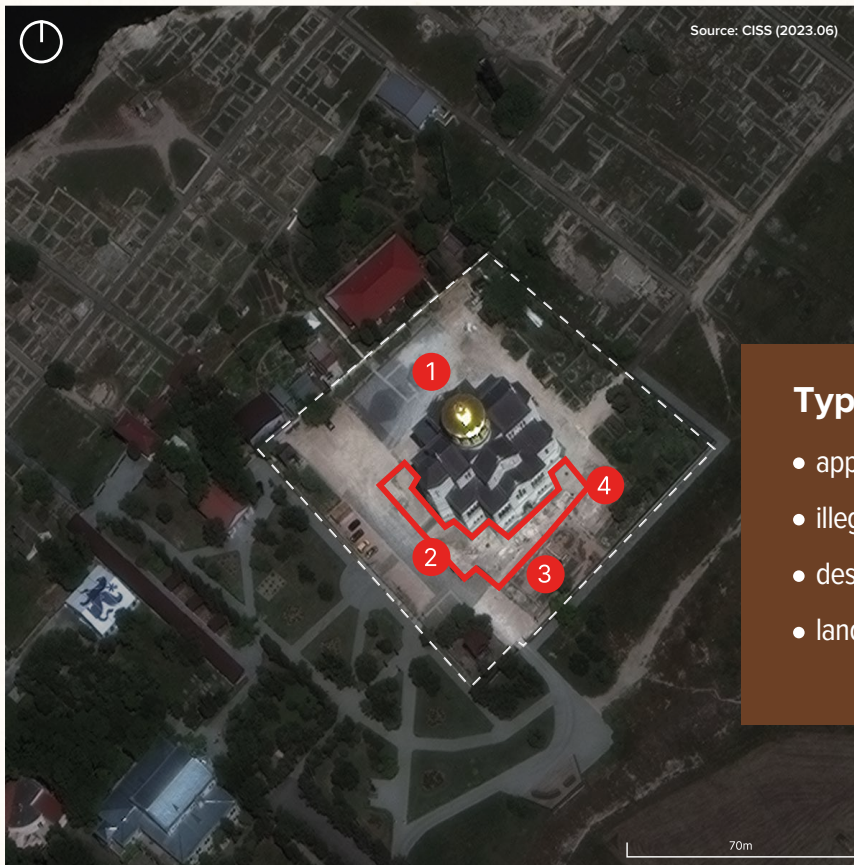
✦ LOCATION 3: QUARTERS 7, 11 AND 11-A IN THE CENTRAL PART OF THE CITY

Object 1. Block 7 with Byzantine baths and a 9th–11th-century water catchment cistern-prison with a graffiti complex on the walls.

Object 2. Temple no. 26.

Object 3. Sixth-century church (basilica on the “agora”, Temple No. 28).

Object 4. Cross-domed church (Temple No. 29).



See a detailed
model here

Type of violation:



- appropriation of immovable and movable cultural heritage sites,
- illegal archaeological excavations,
- destruction of immovable cultural heritage sites,
- land works that led to the loss of authenticity of the site.

OBJECT 1. BLOCK 7 WITH BYZANTINE BATHS AND A 9TH–11TH-CENTURY WATER CATCHMENT CISTERN-PRISON WITH A GRAFFITI COMPLEX ON THE WALLS

The northwestern part of Block 7 was occupied by a large medieval city estate. Its central object was a water catchment cistern with a volume of 85.30–86.00 m³. The unique archaeological facility was uncovered during the excavation conducted in the framework of the Ukrainian-Polish research project “Topography and Architecture of Tauric Chersonese” under the supervision of S. Ryzhov (Tauric Chersonese National Preserve, Ukraine) and A.B. Biernacki (Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, Poland) in 2002.



Graffiti of the Horseman on the wall of the Cistern Prison. First half of the 11th century

OBJECT 2. TEMPLE NO. 26

Discovered in 1861 and investigated in connection with the construction of St. Volodymyr’s Cathedral in 1891–1892 and 1896. The church is a small basilica with three naves and a semicircular apse. The chronology and other characteristics of the church are unclear due to the damage the site sustained because of the monastery’s activities in the second half of the 19th century.

OBJECT 3. 6TH CENTURY CHURCH (BASILICA ON THE “AGORA”, TEMPLE NO. 28)

Discovered in 1861 and investigated in connection with the construction of St. Volodymyr’s Cathedral in 1891–1893 and 1896. The object is a basilica with one central apse. Just as most similar churches, it was built in the 6th century and destroyed in the 14th century. The apse originally had a semicircular shape, built in the opus mixtum technique (interspersed layers of brickwork and hewn stone). At a later stage, the apse was redesigned into a pentagonal shape, a characteristic feature of the building fashion in Crimea from the mid-13th century. The central nave of the church was flanked by marble columns (now partially replaced). In the early 2000s, the basilica was not fully restored. The columns of the basilica were restored by the method of anastylosis¹².



The Cistern Prison in block 7. 2002

OBJECT 4. CROSS-DOMED CHURCH (TEMPLE NO. 29)

Discovered in 1861 and investigated in connection with the construction of St. Volodymyr's Cathedral in 1891–1892 and 1896. The church dates from the 9th to the middle (2nd half?) of the 14th century. It has an almost square shape, with a cross-shaped semicircular apse inside. There are four pillars inside the church, indicating that it had a dome. At the time of the first discovery and research, the church had walls made of beautifully processed stones, which were stolen for construction material in the early 20th century. The entrance from the Main Street of Chersonese was decorated with a portico with columns.

In 2024, unauthorized earthworks were carried out on the territory of Block 7 to lay utility lines. Damage to the cultural layer and archaeological sites is confirmed by the results of retrospective, cartographic and geoinformation analyzes.

The total area of damage is at least 77 m². Plans and photographs of archaeological works, based on the results of research by the Polish-Ukrainian archaeological expedition led by S. Ryzhov and A. B. Bernacki (2002), confirm the damage to the masonry walls of the medieval manor.



*Cross-domed church No. 29.
Illegal excavations. 2020*



Temple No. 26. Illegal excavations. 2023

In 2020 and 2022–2023, illegal archaeological excavations were carried out on the territory of churches 26, 28, and 29 on an area of at least 57 meters², damaging open cultural heritage sites. The fact of damage to the cultural layer is confirmed by methods of objective control through satellite imagery and published research results¹². Based on these data, as well as published research results, including those of K. K. Kościuszko-Waluszyński in 1902–1903, it was established that basilicas Nos. 28 and 29 (including the ossuary), church No. 26 and medieval buildings were damaged. It is necessary to emphasize the uniqueness and historical value of some of the lost objects belonging to the late period of the existence of Chersonese in the 14th century.

The analysis of various activities on the territory of the Chersonese hillfort, including construction works and illegal archaeological excavations in 2022–2024, confirms the virtual functioning of the monastery on the territory of the Tauric Chersonese site. As of September 2024, the destruction of the cultural layer and archaeological sites over an area of more than 500 m² was recorded.

The adaptation of the territory of the ancient and medieval city to the needs of the monastery is taking place at the expense of the destruction of valuable monuments of architecture and archaeological sites of the hillfort, which are an integral part of the protected status of the site and form its universal cultural value as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In addition, we observe a change in the historical narrative about the site and a decrease in the exhibition space dedicated to the ancient period of the history of Tauric Chersonese. Given the large space covered by the monastery's activities, this situation poses a potential threat to the integrity of the site and the preservation of the historical landscape of the ancient city.

The complex may have also included the baths opened in 1861. The cistern was built in the second half of the 9th century, and in the first half of the 11th century, it was transformed into a prison and functioned in this status until the second half of the 11th century. During the use of the tank as a prison, prisoners created unique graffiti on the walls of the former cistern, which is now covered with soil and is inaccessible.



*Graffiti of the Trident on the wall of the Cistern Prison.
First half of the 11th century.*

REFERENCES

- 1 A variety of funerary sites are known on its territory, to wit: simple earth graves, earth graves with stone slabs or stone lining, alla capucina (graves made of tiles or with tile lining), crypts, tombs made of stone slabs, stepped graves with urns, a columbarium, mausoleums, crematoriums and crematory grounds. Funerary sites and complexes had their own layout, formed along a network of roads leading from the city gates. This organization of the Necropolis space is traditional for the Hellenic world. The closest analogies can be found in the ancient cities of Greece and Asia Minor (for example, Athens and Assos). The study of the Necropolis began in 1845. The most extensive excavations were carried out in 1888–1907 by the creator and first director of the museum, K. K. Kościuszko-Waluszyński. Among the most comprehensive studies of the Chersonese necropolis, the following works should be noted: Chersonesus Taurica in the Principate by O. Klenina, Chersonese crypts with picturesque paintings by E. Turovskiy and A. Filippenko.
- 2 Solovyova N.F., Vinogradov Yu.A., Myts V.L., Solovyov S.L., Vakhoneev V.V. Brief results of archaeological excavations of the southern suburb of Chersonese. Bulletin of the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences: (protective archaeology). No. 15. Scientific editors N.F. Solovyova, S.L. Solovyov. St. Petersburg: IHMC RAS, 2024. P. 17.).
- 3 <https://sevastopol.su/news/chast-hersonesa-tavricheskogo-v-sevastopole-stanet-zakrytoy>
- 4 Journals of the Holy Synod of March 12, 2024, Nos. 35, 36, 37 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/6109912.html>
- 5 <https://sevastopol.su/news/chast-hersonesa-tavricheskogo-v-sevastopole-stanet-zakrytoy>
- 6 <https://sevastopol.su/news/chast-hersonesa-tavricheskogo-v-sevastopole-stanet-zakrytoy>
- 7 <https://sevastopol.su/news/chast-hersonesa-tavricheskogo-v-sevastopole-stanet-zakrytoy>
- 8 https://ciss.org.ua/ua/sk_page.html?object_code=542c515c269825830028ce24648ccb85#lg=1&slide=2
- 9 Assos (Ass, Ancient Greek Ἄσσοϛ) was an ancient city in Troas in Asia Minor, on the Aegean coast.
- 10 Priene was an Ionian city on the western shore of Caria, on Cape Mykale, at the mouth of the Geson river (Γαίωv), 10 km north of the Meander and 16 km east of the Aegean Sea.
- 11 Ptochotrophium was a term used in the Byzantine Empire to refer to a shelter or charitable institution for poor and sick people. They were the early analogues of modern hospitals, charitable institutions, or nursing homes. They were often founded at monasteries or churches and functioned thanks to donations from wealthy citizens and imperial grants. They provided the poor not only with food but also with housing and sometimes medical care. Ptochotrophia were an important part of the Byzantine social welfare system and were often combined with other institutions, such as a nosocomium (hospital) or orphanage.
- 12 A restoration method consisting in the re-establishment of original blocks and parts of a monument that have been displaced as a result of destruction or alteration



The Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS)

is a non-governmental organization founded in Kyiv (Ukraine) in 2014. It focuses on examining the state of protection of cultural heritage sites in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and identifying the main trends in this area through the prism of international humanitarian law. The CISS creates critical, holistic and fact-based content that ensures the right to truthful, unbiased and up-to-date information about the indigenous peoples of Ukraine in the historical, cultural and political dimensions, as well as about violations against cultural heritage in the temporarily occupied territories.



The Center for Spatial Technologies (CST)

is a multidisciplinary research organization founded in Kyiv in 2018. The team uses innovative spatial analysis and visualization approaches to explore a variety of topics, developing methods that synthesize and combine data into dynamic spatial models. These models function as research platforms, revealing relationships and contexts that might otherwise go unnoticed. Since 2022, the CST team has focused on analyzing the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including crimes against civilians and destruction of infrastructure, as well as crimes against cultural heritage.

