KUL-OBA STUDIES
PART III. KUL-OBA: THE FOURTH BURIAL
(A Grave or a Secret Cache?)

N.L. GRACH

It is appropriate now to turn attention to another question linked with the discovery of the burial-mound — the story of the looting. From Dubrux’s report and archive documents it is clear that on the night of September 24/25th — in other words three days after the vault and its contents had been surveyed and described — looters succeeded in getting into the tomb. They managed to make off with everything that Dubrux had not finished examining and recording. From him we learn that the whole of the south wall and part of the east wall had not yet been investigated, where, according to the nocturnal visitors, they found “an incalculable amount of gold embossed figures or leaf sheets of the kind we had found on the previous days.” To what extent this was the true picture we shall never know, since the articles disappeared without trace. The most interesting and unusual part of this story is the discovery of the tomb or cache, which the looters uncovered beneath the slabs of the floor in the tomb and from which the famous Kul-Oba deer allegedly originated.

First of all we need to ask: was it a grave or a hiding-place? Secondly was the deer really found there or not? It is no coincidence that doubts have been raised with regard to this discovery because, as we know, Dubrux himself was not present when the find was made and his descriptions compiled from witness accounts have been included in the final report in a fragmentary, not very clear way. Nevertheless, we shall attempt to summarize all available information on this question in a systematic way in order to draw nearer to the truth.

Dubrux only learnt about the details of this happening in the winter, in February 1831, from the local peasant of Greek origin named Bavro, who had been involved in the nocturnal visit to the grave. It was in his house that objects from it were found: part of a torque with a lion’s head and an encrusted terminal and a plate in the shape of deer.

Bavro reported as follows: after taking everything that remained in the vault, they had noticed in the cracks in the stone floor small gold plates, which had either turned up their by chance or had been swept there out of sight, noticed when they were cleaning out the vault and so they began to turn over the slabs
of the stone floor, starting to the right of the door. “Then they discovered a grave dug into the soil of the hill, which consisted of yellow clay. The grave, which was not surrounded by stones was filled with friable black earth, was 1 arshin (i.e. 71 cms) deep and measured almost the same across, while its length was more than three arshins (213 cms). The head of the skeleton was up against the western wall, the bones had almost turned to dust.” In the earth around it there were several gold articles including a twisted torque at the neck, a third thicker than the first two (this is a reference to the torques from the principal burials: NG).

The object was chopped into three parts with an axe and divided up between the three men involved. To their great regret the torque turned out not to have been made of gold, but to have a bronze core. The same turned out to be true of the golden facing of the bow-case. Dubrux had seen several pieces of the bow facing complete with bas-reliefs of, as he notes, clothed figures similar to those found near the ‘king.’ According to Bavro, the above-mentioned deer tormented by a borzoi dog had been found in the same place, along with many arrow-heads and iron spears.

We might well ask whether this story was merely invented. It is unlikely. We immediately gain a picture of what is clearly a competently described burial complex. It is interesting to note that even the fact that the deceased lay with his head pointing westwards is noted, i.e. with the same orientation as the second male skeleton in the tomb. There is no need to doubt Bavro’s words for another reason as well, namely the fact that he later brought along his share of the loot — namely the deer and the terminal from the torque — voluntarily and handed them in to Stempkovskii, when Dubrux asked him to, even before he learnt that his noble act would earn him a reward from the Tsar of 1200 roubles.

Could Dubrux have added something to this account to make it appear more convincing? This is quite out of the question. We know Dubrux to have been extremely precise and painstaking in his descriptions of monuments. He could have overlooked something or have failed to understand something fully, but everything he observed he used to reproduce with extraordinary thoroughness. It is precisely because of his “excessive detail” that Dubrux’s work failed initially to win the credit it was due.

One thing seems strange. Dubrux described in detail the impression which the looted tomb made on him on the morning of September 25th. He notes the stones that had been moved and which might easily have killed the looters if they had fallen down, the fact that the looters had emptied those parts of the tomb, which he had not had time to examine and the upturned stone slabs of the floor. Yet he