The Kul-Oba burial-mound is among the best-known and most popular sites of Graeco-Scythian culture in the Northern Pontic Region. This royal burial-mound containing a group burial of a Scythian type was discovered in 1830 six kilometres west of Kerch, which in ancient times had been the capital of the Bosporan Kingdom — Panticapaeum.

This event immediately attracted close attention from the people of the day — scholars, artists, art connoisseurs and, naturally, representatives of state power. This occurred not merely because of the extraordinary wealth and abundance of the articles made of precious metals that had been found in the burial-mound, but also because of the artistic qualities of many of the articles. The Kul-Oba pendants with filigree work and the high-relief head of Athena-Parthenos, the gold plate in the shape of a deer, the electrum vase with depictions of Scythians, silver vessels with exquisitely worked scenes of fighting animals and many other masterpieces of ancient masters from this burial-mound are constantly used to decorate the pages of the most diverse publications on the history of world art and culture.

Yet, as is often the case, and paradoxical though it may seem, over the last 160 years since the burial-mound was discovered, only a very few of these articles have been the subject of serious scientific study. Nor has any monograph with an investigation of the whole range of objects seen the light of day.

The fact that this situation has developed is more than just coincidence. Many circumstances have contributed to this state of affairs. As far back as the 1920s...
the former director of the Kerch Museum, Y.Y. Marti commented: “The gold from Kul-Oba dazzled everyone and deflected the attention of archaeologists for a long time from questions of topography, encouraging them instead to look for more gold. Scientific analysis was relegated to the background. From that time on the government was prepared to provide funds to help people unearth the treasures concealed deep within the burial-mounds at Kerch.” Indeed the discovery of the Kul-Oba burial-mound marked the beginning of large-scale archaeological work throughout the South-Russian steppes, which went on for almost a century. Each year new sites would appear including similar complexes with burials of Scythian kings or Bosporan nobles — the burial-mounds known as Bolshaya Bliznitsa, Chertomlyk, Deyev, Alexandropolskii, Solokha and so on. The Kul-Oba burial-mound headed the list merely as the first of the famous burial-mounds.

A part was also played by the inadequate and confused documentation relating to the process of the excavation of the burial-mound, and the recording of the finds, but also by the lack of archaeological expertise on the part of those who first discovered the Kul-Oba burial-mound. Moreover, not all the finds made their way to the Hermitage Museum. It is well known that some of them were deliberately made over to local museums or private collectors and, in most cases of this kind, the objects concerned were lost or taken beyond the borders of Russia at various times. It is quite clear, for instance, that there are some gold plates from Kul-Oba in the British Museum, in German museums, in America and so on. Almost all the objects that were not works of art also disappeared. This means that it is impossible to have a complete picture of the significance of the site and we shall never know the total number of objects from it.

Last but not least, the range of objects from the Kul-Oba burial-mound is unique and also some of the art works, particularly as far as the toreutics and the jewellery are concerned. It is precisely for this reason that interpretation of the site is so complicated, controversial and an inexhaustible subject for discussion with regard to a wide range of questions of interest to researchers. Yet despite all this, with regard to the discovery of the Kul-Oba burial-mound and the description of the burials found in it and individual articles, a definite pattern has emerged in the literature, which has come to be accepted everywhere. This pattern or approach has never been subjected to any major review. It is repeated from one work to the next with only minor variations, in which small inaccuracies are reflected that had been introduced by certain scholars working

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1 Y.Y. Marti, Sto let Kerchenskogo muzeya (A Hundred Years of the Kerch Museum), Kerch, 1926, p. 8.