

Article

Reusing Kurgans in the Western Scythian World

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Abstract

Kurgans in the Northern Black Sea region have long been treated as monuments “frozen” in their Scythian moment, yet excavation records show repeated re-engagement over much longer timescales. This article argues that kurgan reuse in the Western Scythian world is best understood not as a single behaviour, but as a bundle of practices with different archaeological signatures and social implications. Rather than offering an exhaustive catalogue, the study develops a methodological framework based on selected published case studies. It proposes a three-part typology: (1) intrusive mortuary reuse, that is, later secondary or inserted burials placed within earlier mounds; (2) associative reuse, including landscape appropriation, in which older barrows structured later funerary space through clustering, demarcation, visibility, and spatial reference; and (3) reuse through reopening, including shafts, tunnels, selective removal, and the manipulation of human remains. The article applies this framework to evidence from Scythian, Sarmatian, Greek, and early medieval/medieval contexts, with particular attention to Sarmatian intrusive burials in earlier barrows, the structured reuse of older kurgans in the Molochna basin, reopening and looting in Scythian and Sarmatian mounds, and the cross-cultural case of Koshary in the Olbian chora. The discussion situates these practices within mortuary archaeology, social memory, and the politics of the past, and argues that older kurgans could function not only as burial places, but also as mnemonic anchors, territorial markers, and targets of symbolic aggression.

Keywords: kurgans; secondary burials; reuse; mortuary archaeology; social memory; politics of the past; North Pontic region; Western Scythian world; landscape appropriation; Olbian chora

1. Introduction

1.1. Beyond “Frozen” Monuments: The Long-Term Biographies of North Pontic Kurgans

The famous Scythian kurgans of the North Pontic region have traditionally been perceived—especially in museum exhibitions and popular narratives—primarily in relation to the period in which they were constructed, as if they were static features of the landscape and mere remnants of a distant past.¹ Such a perspective implicitly treats kurgans as monuments fixed at the moment of burial, whose historical significance is limited to the funerary event that created them. In reality, however, burial mounds were rarely static monuments. They functioned as long-term cultural markers embedded in the landscape, repeatedly revisited, reopened, modified, and assigned new meanings by later communities.² Some mounds remained meaningful landscape features even after their funerary function had ceased, continuing to operate as ritual settings, loci of offering, points of orientation, or persistent markers of sacred space.



Academic Editor: Caspar Meyer

Received: 16 June 2026

Revised: 14 July 2026

Accepted: 16 July 2026

Published: 20 July 2026

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In this article, reuse is understood not only as the continuous use of a burial mound within a single funerary tradition, but also as renewed engagement with an existing monument after a meaningful chronological, social, or cultural interval. This distinction is crucial, since the later biography of a kurgan may involve several different processes: intrusive mortuary reuse, associative reuse within the landscape, destructive reopening, selective removal of objects or human remains, and other forms of post-funerary intervention.

The dominance of the “frozen monument” perspective is partly rooted in the early history of research. Precious objects made of gold, silver, and electrum—often produced in workshops located in the Greek cities of the North Pontic region—attracted the first researchers working in the area, who were primarily concerned with collecting exceptionally rich funerary assemblages for museum galleries and imperial collections.³ This museum-centred view is especially visible in the reception of the elite barrows around Kerch, including Kul-Oba, the Tsarskyi Kurgan, and the Yuz-Oba necropolis, which have usually been presented through their spectacular assemblages and architectural monumentality rather than through their later histories.⁴

Yet these monuments were not only repositories of elite objects. They were dynamic elements of the Pontic steppe landscape, with long and complex biographies. Recent studies by (Topal 2019) and (Johnson 2024) have drawn attention to the long-term afterlife of kurgans as cultural markers, forming “moundsapes” in relation to rivers, hills, routes, and other elements of local topography.⁵ Although looting has often been recorded as evidence of later intrusion into North Pontic barrows, related activities were rarely analysed systematically with regard to their motives, chronology, and relationship to other forms of post-funerary activity.⁶ When examined more closely, many disturbed contexts cannot be reduced to simple robbery. They may reflect structured forms of reopening, selective manipulation of human remains, ritual intervention, or later appropriation of the monument within a transformed social landscape.

The scale of the material makes a comprehensive catalogue of kurgan reuse unrealistic. Topal’s study of the area between the Dniester, Prut, and Danube rivers records more than 700 excavated kurgans with over 5000 burials, while landscape-based estimates suggest more than 10,000 mound features (Topal 2019, pp. 31–32). Demina’s study of only 150 km² in the North Azov region recorded 92 kurgans with 435 burials (Demina 2024, p. 103), and Mamai-Hora demonstrates that many levelled mounds survive only as archaeologically detectable features (Andrukh and Toshchev 2012, pp. 275–76). These examples indicate both the density of the kurgan landscape and the difficulty of treating it as a closed dataset.

The present study therefore does not aim to produce an exhaustive inventory of reused North Pontic kurgans. Instead, it proposes a methodological framework for examining their long-term biographies through selected case studies. The case study from Koshary, discussed below, demonstrates that the appropriation of older burial mounds was not limited to the steppe world, but could also form part of cultural identity in the context of Greek settlement. Comparative examples, including the Greek and Anglo-Saxon reuse of prehistoric monuments, further suggest that the reuse of earlier barrows was a cross-cultural phenomenon, recurring over many centuries and shaped by diverse mortuary, social, and political practices.

1.2. State of Research and Interpretative Debate: Robbery, Ritual, Disturbance, and Reuse

The interpretation of disturbed kurgan contexts has long oscillated between two explanatory poles: pragmatic looting and ritual disturbance. Burial looting is a common cross-cultural and diachronic phenomenon and has often been used as a convenient explanatory model for disturbed layers within kurgans, including those of the Eurasian steppe. As Crescioli notes, Soviet scholarship, shaped in part by Marxist interpretative

frameworks, frequently treated robbery as the most straightforward explanation for disturbed burials, leaving relatively little room for more complex ritual or social interpretations (Crescioli 2020, p. 112).

Yatsenko and Kilunovskaya observe that this emphasis on pragmatic looting was also influenced by modern historical experience. In the Russian Empire, the large-scale activities of mound diggers searching for valuable artefacts encouraged scholars to project similar motivations onto ancient disturbances. Later, during the Soviet period, official atheism further reinforced interpretative models that prioritised utilitarian and economic motives when explaining complex archaeological phenomena. At the opposite end of the interpretative spectrum lies the tendency to explain post-burial disturbances primarily in terms of ritual practice. In reality, however, the range of post-burial interventions is considerably broader than either of these simplified explanatory models suggests (Yatsenko and Kilunovskaya 2016, p. 10).

During the last few decades, these traditional interpretations have been increasingly challenged in both Eurasian and Western European archaeology. This shift has led to research initiatives, conferences, and publications devoted to disturbed graves, including the Grave Reopening Research project (<http://reopenedgraves.eu/>; accessed on 17 June 2026), focused on grave disturbance in early medieval Europe, and the conference volume *Ancient Cemeteries and Settlements: Post-Burial Rites, Symbolic Interments and Grave Plundering*, published in 2016 (Nosov 2016). A renewed phase in the debate was marked by Yatsenko's study of synchronous Sarmatian grave robberies. His work was particularly significant because scholars of Sarmatian archaeology had long doubted whether reliable criteria could be established for distinguishing ancient looting from disturbances caused in more recent times (Yatsenko 2013; Yatsenko and Kilunovskaya 2016, p. 10).

The proportion of disturbed burials under barrows belonging to the Scythian cultural horizon is particularly high in the North Pontic region; it has been estimated at between 70 and 100% (Crescioli 2020, p. 117; Polin 2017, p. 527). Antiquarian interest (along with modern looting activities) in burial mounds intensified from the early eighteenth century onwards, particularly under Peter I, whose policies contributed to the formation of the so-called "Siberian Collection," today housed in the Hermitage Museum. Such large-scale looting and antiquarian excavations were particularly characteristic of southern Russia and Siberia (Crescioli 2020, p. 117).

Archaeological evidence from the Eurasian steppe demonstrates that, apart from looting and ritual reopening, burial manipulation may reflect a wide range of post-burial practices, including secondary burials, repeated use of mounds as collective or family tombs, selective removal of bones or objects, and ancestor-related rites. Crescioli illustrates this diversity with case studies from the Eurasian steppe and adjacent regions, including Tuva, the Trans-Urals, the Altai, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and the Caucasus. These examples show that disturbed kurgans, dating from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age, may reflect diverse social and ritual practices rather than looting alone (Crescioli 2020, pp. 112–23). Crescioli therefore stresses the need for strict methodological procedures in the excavation and analysis of such contexts in order to understand the social, ideological, and funerary dynamics that shaped these burial landscapes (Crescioli 2020, p. 113).

The crucial methodological problem is therefore how to distinguish between robbery, ritual intervention, intrusive burial, and the long-term reuse of kurgans. These actions may produce similar archaeological signatures, yet they reflect fundamentally different social and funerary practices. For this reason, looting should be treated not as a default explanation, but as one possible form of reopening within a broader spectrum of post-funerary engagement.

1.3. Aims and Research Questions

Building on this understanding of kurgans as monuments with extended biographies, this study focuses on the methodological problem of distinguishing different forms of reuse in the archaeological record. Its central aim is to develop an analytical framework that makes it possible to separate destructive reopening, intrusive mortuary reuse, and associative or landscape-based appropriation, while also recognising that these practices may overlap in complex archaeological contexts.

One of the main methodological challenges concerns destructive re-entry, often interpreted as robbery. Such interventions may have occurred shortly after burial, when knowledge of the deceased and the contents of the grave was still available, or many centuries later, by groups with no direct cultural connection to the original monument (Yatsenko 2013, p. 27; Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov 2013, p. 81). Yet destructive reopening should not be reduced to economic looting. It may also reflect inter-group rivalry, symbolic violence, territorial claims, or attempts to appropriate land by transforming or erasing the memory of earlier communities (Demina 2024, p. 119). In some cases, the aim may have been the targeted retrieval of objects associated with prestige, authority, or ritual power rather than the indiscriminate removal of valuables (Crescioli 2020, p. 119).

At the same time, reopening is only one aspect of a broader spectrum of reuse. Later inserted burials, the appropriation of older mounds within new funerary landscapes, and non-mortuary uses of kurgans as ritual or territorial markers all demonstrate that these monuments continued to structure social memory long after their initial construction. Examples such as the Greek chora of Olbia Pontike, especially Koshary, show that this process was not limited to steppe communities, but could also operate in contact-zone contexts, where older Bronze Age barrows helped anchor new forms of territorial and cultural identity (Porucznik 2021, p. 58).

This study tests the proposed framework against evidence from the Scythian and Sarmatian horizons and situates the results within a broader comparative perspective, including material from outside the North Pontic region. In doing so, it aims to refine the methodological criteria used to distinguish different forms of reuse and to clarify their social and cultural significance.

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

- Can different forms of kurgan reuse in the Western Scythian world be systematically classified within a coherent analytical framework?
- How can reopening, destructive intervention, intrusive burial, and associative reuse be distinguished methodologically in the archaeological record?
- How did different forms of reuse contribute to the long-term biographies of kurgans as monuments of memory, identity, and territorial claim-making?

2. Sources, Dataset, and Analytical Framework

2.1. Dataset Selection and Source Base

The dataset used in this study is not intended to be exhaustive, given the large number of kurgans recorded across the Western Scythian world, the uneven state of publication of the archaeological record, and, in some cases, the absence of a coherent methodological approach, as has often been noted by archaeologists working in this area (Yatsenko 2013, p. 25; Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov 2013, p. 81). Instead, it was designed as an analytical corpus composed of selected case studies that make it possible to test different forms of kurgan reuse within a coherent comparative framework (see Figure 1). The primary criterion for inclusion was geographical and cultural relevance to the Western Scythian core, understood here as the North Pontic region and adjacent areas in which Scythian-period barrows formed a persistent and highly visible component of the landscape.

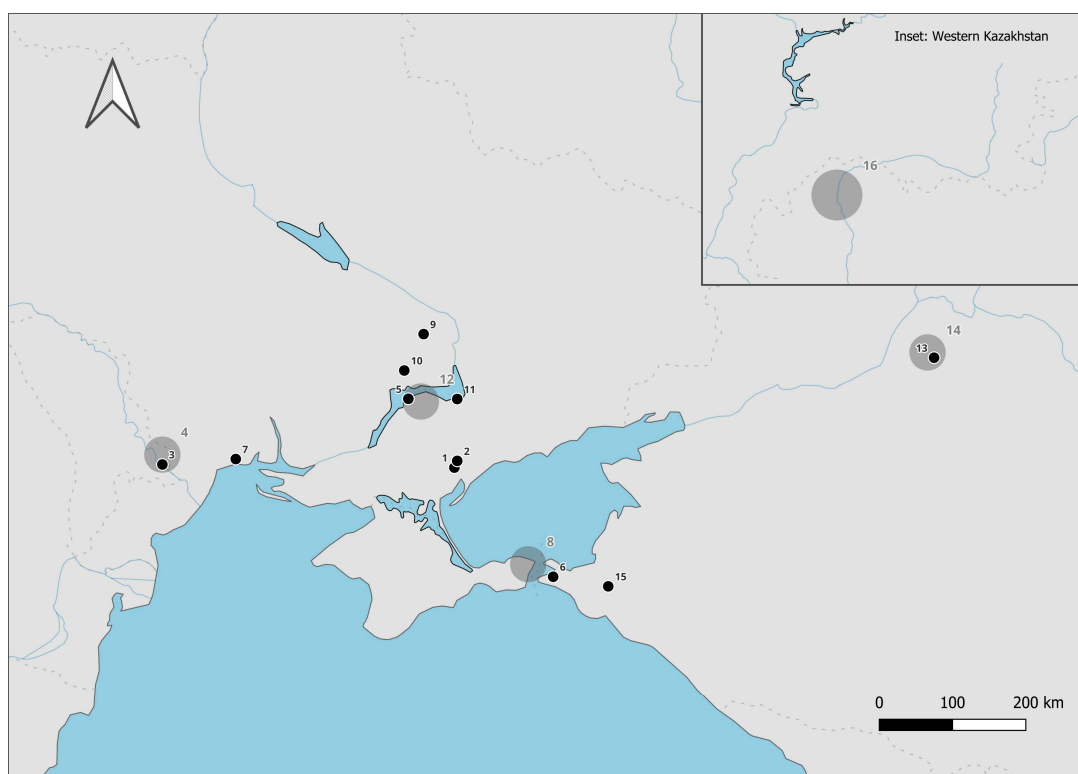


Figure 1. Approximate location of the case studies discussed in the paper. Large translucent circles indicate regional clusters or approximate cluster centroids; numbered black points indicate individual sites or kurgan groups. 1: Vovchanske 1 and Vovchanske 5; 2: Davydivka 1–2/Velyky Kurhan near Volodymyrivka; 3: Hlinaia (Glinoye), “Sad” group, kurgan 12; 4: Prut–Dniester/Tiraspol–Chobruchi–Sputnik cluster; 5: Mamai-Hora; 6: Vinogradnoe 7, kurgan 2; 7: Koshary older Bronze Age barrows and barrow no. 55; 8: Kerch-area kurgan field: Tsarskyi Kurgan, Kul-Oba, Yuz-Oba; Temir-Gora 9: Aleksandropol Royal Kurgan; 10: Chertomlyk Royal Kurgan; 11: Haimanova Mohyla; 12: Oguz, Babina Mohyla, Soboleva Mohyla, and Tovsta Mohyla; 13: Kovalevka, kurgans 13 and 25; 14: Oktyabrsky-V, Peregruznoe I, and Aksai II; 15: Udarnyi-I, Grave 6; 16: Western Kazakhstan/North Caspian cluster: Shagan, Barbastau, Karasu, Alebastrova. Prepared by the author using QGIS. Base map data from Natural Earth, public domain.

A second principle of selection was methodological rather than purely regional. In order to test the proposed framework against different archaeological signatures of reuse, the dataset includes cases involving destructive reopening, inserted burials, and landscape-based appropriation. Particular attention is given to Scythian and Sarmatian material, including early and late Sarmatian cases, especially where later burials were inserted into earlier Scythian or Bronze Age barrows. These cases are especially useful for examining long-term reuse, stratigraphic intrusion, and changing relationships between later communities and earlier burial monuments.

The corpus was assembled from two main categories of sources. The first consists of primary excavation reports and site publications, which provide the stratigraphic, architectural, and artefactual detail necessary for reconstructing sequences of burial, reopening, and reuse. The second comprises synthetic and diagnostic studies directly relevant to the methodology and interpretation of disturbed and reused kurgans, especially the works of Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov on Sarmatian robberies and reopenings (Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov 2013), Polin on Scythian barrows (Polin 2017), and Crescioli on disturbed graves and post-burial interventions in a broader comparative perspective (Crescioli 2020). The typological distinction between intrusive burial and associative reuse also

draws on Semple's analysis of the West Sussex material, while being adapted here to the specific character of the North Pontic evidence (Semple 2008).

2.2. Coding Framework and Diagnostic Criteria

The case studies included in the dataset were coded using a set of analytical categories designed to capture the main forms of kurgan reuse addressed in this study. The coding framework distinguishes three principal categories: intrusive mortuary reuse, associative reuse, and reuse through reopening, including destructive interventions.

Intrusive mortuary reuse was assigned where a later burial was inserted into a pre-existing mound, as defined by its stratigraphic relationship to an earlier burial phase. This category includes cases described in the archaeological literature using field terms such as *впускное* (*vpusknoe*), *впущенное* (*vpushchennoe*), or *вторичное погребение* (*vtorichnoe pogrebenie*), as well as English-language terms such as "secondary," "intrusive," or "inserted burial." Because these terms are not always used consistently, classification in this study depends primarily on stratigraphic position and chronological relationship rather than terminology alone.

Associative reuse was suggested for cases in which a mound was appropriated spatially, visually, or symbolically without necessarily involving penetration into the earlier funerary core. This includes situations where cemetery organisation, demarcation, alignment, or settlement-related spatial practice was structured in relation to pre-existing barrows. In such cases, the earlier mound functioned as a visible or meaningful landscape marker, even if it was not physically reopened.

Reuse through reopening was applied where the archaeological record indicates deliberate re-entry into an earlier burial context. This includes destructive interventions through shafts, tunnels, breaches, or partial dismantling of mound architecture, as well as selective removal of objects, disturbance of burial deposits, or manipulation of human remains. This category includes cases traditionally interpreted as robbery, but it does not treat looting as the default explanation. Instead, robbery is considered one possible form of reopening, alongside ritual, social, or politically motivated interventions.

Each case study was evaluated through a cumulative rather than single-factor approach. Classification depended on a combined assessment of multiple variables, including: (1) the stratigraphic relationship between burial events; (2) the architecture, placement, and directionality of access routes; (3) the position of intrusive features within the mound; (4) the treatment of earlier deposits and chamber elements; (5) the presence or absence of newly inserted burials; (6) the selectivity of removed or displaced artefacts; and (7) the handling and rearrangement of human remains. Particular attention was paid to whether an intervention targeted the earlier burial deposit itself or, alternatively, established a new spatial or symbolic relationship with the mound. This distinction is critical for separating reopening from intrusive mortuary reuse and from associative forms of appropriation.

Since the archaeological record is often incomplete and publication standards vary considerably, the coding procedure incorporated interpretive caution. Some cases can be assigned confidently to a single category, whereas others display overlapping features and are therefore treated as mixed or ambiguous. In such instances, the primary classification is based on the dominant archaeological signature preserved in the published record, while secondary features are noted explicitly. The aim of the coding procedure is not to impose rigid typological boundaries, but to provide a consistent comparative framework through which the variability of kurgan reuse can be analysed across the Western Scythian world and analogous contexts.

Table 1 below presents the typology and diagnostic criteria applied in this study, where the archaeological record permits, and is intended as a proposed methodological framework for comparable research.

Table 1. Typology of kurgan reuse and diagnostic criteria applied in this study.

Reuse Type	Definition	Diagnostic Criteria	Minimum Evidence Threshold
Type I—Intrusive mortuary reuse (secondary/ inserted burials)	Later burial(s) cut into a pre-existing barrow (mound body, ditch, or barrow architecture), post-dating the original mound episode.	(a) Cut features (grave cuts) truncating earlier mound/ditch deposits; (b) later burial located within the mound/ditch footprint; (c) explicit field terms such as <i>впускное/впущенное/вторичное погребение</i> or “secondary/intrusive/inserted burial”; (d) independent dating showing later phase than primary mound episode.	Stratigraphic proof of cutting or explicit excavator attribution as intrusive/secondary with contextual description sufficient to exclude primary burials.
Type II—Associative reuse/landscape appropriation	Older barrows appropriated as landmarks that structure later mortuary space (demarcation, anchoring, alignment, buffer zones) without necessary intrusion into mound bodies.	(a) Spatial analysis showing patterned placement around/along older mounds (rings, arcs, consistent distances); (b) cemetery boundaries or sectoring keyed to older barrows; (c) alignment with ridges/river corridors where the older moundscapes acts as a spatial marker; (d) explicit statements that the necropolis was organised in relation to pre-existing mounds/roads.	Explicit primary publication claim of deliberate demarcation/anchoring and/or clearly documented patterned spatial relationship that is unlikely to be incidental (supported by plans/maps).
Type III—Reopening/ robbery/ destructive re-entry	Later intentional re-entry into a barrow’s interior (shafts, tunnels, reopened chambers), including selective destruction and multi-episodic intrusion; treated as meaningful post-use engagement.	(a) Robbery shafts/tunnels (vertical or oblique) connecting to chamber; (b) displaced skeletal elements, disturbed chamber fill, selective removal patterns; (c) evidence for multiple intrusion episodes (different shafts, refilling events); (d) contextual dating of intrusion (e.g., intrusion sealed by later feature; or intrusion method consistent with ancient re-entry).	Clear description/illustration of intrusion architecture (shaft/tunnel) and/or unambiguous excavation observations of reopening/destruction attributable to post-burial action (not merely erosion/ploughing).

3. Results: Archaeological Evidence by Reuse Type

3.1. Type I—Intrusive Reuse (Secondary/Inserted Burials)

Intrusive reuse is the most archaeologically detectable form of kurgan reuse, since it involves the physical insertion of a later burial into a pre-existing mound. Its interpretation, however, is not straightforward: a burial may be stratigraphically secondary without necessarily representing a later, culturally distinct episode of reuse. The key distinction is therefore between burials that formed part of the original funerary programme and those that reflect renewed engagement with an older monument after a meaningful chronological, social, or cultural interval.

In this sense, the term “intrusive reuse” follows Semple’s discussion of the funerary landscape of West Sussex, where it denotes the insertion of a burial into an older mound (Semple 2008, pp. 410–11; see also Crewe 2012, p. 18; Demina 2024, p. 102). In the present study, however, the concept is used in a deliberately narrow sense, referring specifically to later burials inserted into an already existing kurgan, rather than to all burials that are merely stratigraphically secondary. This distinction is important because a single kurgan

may contain multiple secondary burials belonging to the same cultural horizon without necessarily representing reuse in the stricter sense. Bulhakovo, kurgan 5, is a useful example: the mound was erected over a central burial (Burial 1), but also contained three additional secondary burials (Burials 2–4) belonging to the same funerary horizon (Dargan et al. 2022, p. 399).

3.1.1. Terminological Limits: Secondary Versus Intrusive Burial

The study by Gursoy and Sizdikov (Gursoy and Sizdikov 2022) illustrates both the analytical value of secondary burials and the problems caused by defining the category too broadly. Their material covers Western Kazakhstan north of the Caspian Sea from the sixth century BCE to the fourth century CE. Following local scholarly convention, they use the umbrella term “Sarmatians” for the populations of this region, although for the sixth–fourth centuries BCE “Sauromatians” would be more precise.⁷

Gursoy and Sizdikov use the term “secondary burial” and note that the Russian *впускное погребение* (*vpusknoe pogrebenie*) has no straightforward English equivalent. Yet they do not discuss the alternative term “inserted burial,” which in some contexts corresponds more closely to usage in Russian archaeological literature. In the present study, the two terms are used interchangeably when referring specifically to a burial inserted into an already existing mound. This terminological restriction is necessary because Gursoy and Sizdikov group together deposits placed in mound fill, burials laid on the pre-mound ground surface, and later intrusive pits under the same heading of “secondary burials,” although these represent different archaeological situations. Burials placed on the old ground surface beneath a mound should not automatically be classified as intrusive reuse merely because they are not located in the central grave; they may instead belong to the original funerary programme of the barrow, including multiple or sequential primary interments. This ambiguity is visible in cases such as Zhalgыз Oba and Syntas, where the relationship between the primary and secondary burials remains uncertain (Gursoy and Sizdikov 2022, pp. 30–31).

At the same time, the evidence they present shows that the reuse of earlier mounds for later insertions was particularly marked in the earlier, Sauromatian phase (called Early Sarmatian by the authors), when Late Bronze Age kurgans were reopened and new burials were inserted into them. According to their analysis, this practice continued into the Middle Sarmatian period and declined in the later phase. They also note that such inserted burials often belonged to children, although this observation still requires firmer quantitative support (Gursoy and Sizdikov 2022, p. 26). Examples include Shagan cemetery no. 3 and Barbastau, kurgan no. 2, where child burials were placed within mound deposits, as well as further cases from Karasu, Alebastrova, the Orenburg region, Bashkortostan, the Itil area, and the Don region. Many of these examples remain difficult to assess because their chronology rests chiefly on ritual traits, such as body orientation and grave goods, rather than on independent dating (Gursoy and Sizdikov 2022, pp. 27–29).

3.1.2. Bronze Age Mounds and Early Iron Age Insertions

The reuse of Bronze Age kurgans through later inserted burials was not a strictly local phenomenon, but part of a broader steppe tradition. In the North Pontic region, this pattern is especially clear in connection with Scythian and Sarmatian funerary practices, although earlier periods also show repeated engagement with pre-existing mound structures.

During the Eneolithic–Yamnaya phase, barrows often contained multiple secondary burials. Examples include Velykyi kurgan near Volodymyrivka, which contained 15 Yamnaya burials, and Vovchanske 1, which contained 20 burials. As Demina notes, without

more precise dating it is possible only to suppose that these secondary Yamnaya burials may have preceded most newly constructed Yamnaya barrows in the area (Demina 2024, p. 109). For the Catacomb phase, Demina states that inclusions in earlier barrows constituted the primary type of burial, while only one new barrow was identified in the study area. This points to a phase in which insertion into older mounds, rather than new mound construction, became the dominant mortuary strategy (Demina 2024, pp. 110–11).⁸

In the Scythian horizon, Demina argues that secondary Scythian burials within Bronze Age barrows in the lower Molochna valley appeared approximately at the same time as the first Scythian barrows. Both the secondary burials and the emergence of the Scythian kurgan necropolis in this region are broadly dated to the late fifth century BCE. Demina therefore suggests that the placement of Scythian burials in older barrow clusters had symbolic meaning, expressing a claim to newly occupied territory rather than merely reflecting a lack of resources for constructing new mounds (Demina 2024, pp. 112–14). Among the earlier mounds reused for late-fifth-/fourth-century BCE Scythian burials, she points to one Yamnaya barrow used for a secondary Scythian burial, as well as Vovchanske 5, where one burial inserted into a Bronze Age barrow was accompanied by the addition of a new mound layer (Demina 2024, pp. 108, 113).

This material demonstrates that intrusive reuse could occur at moments of cultural transformation or territorial expansion. In such contexts, insertion into an older mound may have served not only as a practical reuse of an existing elevation, but also as a means of anchoring new funerary practices within an already meaningful landscape.

3.1.3. Reuse of an Early Scythian Kurgan in the Bosporan Contact Zone

A particularly interesting case of multi-period reuse of an Early Scythian mound within a broader cultural contact zone is the kurgan at Temir-Gora near Kerch. Its primary burial, no. 81, belongs to the Early Scythian horizon of the third quarter of the seventh century BCE and is among the earliest securely dated Scythian burials in the region. Vakhtina emphasizes that the mound, originally raised over this Archaic-period burial, continued to be used for funerary purposes in later periods, a fact that points to the long-term sacred significance of the monument in the local landscape. In total, the mound contained eight burials made at different times: the primary burial, two cremation complexes of the fifth to early fourth century BCE (nos. 82 and 83), four collective stone tombs probably dating to the fourth century BCE (nos. 77–80), and a later plastered stone structure near the centre of the mound (no. 76), possibly connected with Bosporan funerary practice from the first century BCE onward. The sequence is especially significant because it reflects the position of Temir-Gora in a Scythian–Bosporan contact zone. While burial no. 81 is interpreted as Scythian in character, the later cremation burials display a high degree of Hellenisation and have been variously interpreted either as Scythian/barbarian aristocratic burials or as closer to the funerary practices of Greek necropoleis. Similarly, the collective stone tombs nos. 77–80 have been compared with Scythian sub-kurgan stone tombs of eastern Crimea but have also been interpreted as Greek funerary monuments connected with the nearby ancient settlement (Vakhtina 2017, pp. 389, 396–402).

Temir-Gora therefore provides a useful example of cross-cultural and multi-period reuse of an Early Scythian kurgan over several centuries, highlighting the extent to which the use of kurgan structures could cut across conventional distinctions between Scythian/steppe and Greek/polis traditions. In this sense, the monument's antiquity, visibility, and anchoring in the local landscape may have been more salient to later users than any precise cultural attribution of the mound of the kind imposed by modern scholarship.

3.1.4. Sarmatian Intrusive Reuse in the North Pontic Region

In the Sarmatian horizon, intrusive reuse becomes particularly visible. Quantitative analysis from the Prut–Dniester interfluvium shows that intrusive Sarmatian burials in kurgan complexes account for 33% of the total, ranking second only to flat-ground burials (53%), while primary kurgan burials are the least numerous (14%). Across the North Pontic region more generally, the total number of intrusive Sarmatian burials likewise exceeds that of primary Sarmatian kurgan burials (S.O. Simonenko 2019, p. 175, with further literature).

A particularly instructive case is the kurgan group “Sad” near Hlinaia (Glinoye) in the Lower Dniester. Simonenko publishes a Sarmatian grave dated to the second century CE inserted into an earlier Scythian barrow (kurgan 12). The mound is identified as a Scythian barrow with a primary burial, although this burial is not described or precisely dated in the publication. By the time of excavation, the barrow had been almost completely destroyed by ploughing, surviving only as a low mound with a preserved circular ditch. It was later reused for further intrusive burials, including a Sarmatian child burial dated by its inventory to the second century CE and an intrusive medieval burial. The Sarmatian child, aged 6–8 years, was laid on the floor of the pit near its eastern wall, and the intrusive cut intersected the southern arc of the ring ditch (S.O. Simonenko 2019, pp. 174–77).⁹ This case is particularly important because it documents not only insertion into an older barrow, but also diachronic, multi-period reuse of the same monument. Simonenko interprets the burial as reflecting the westward movement of Sarmatian groups through the Lower Dniester region (S.O. Simonenko 2019, p. 178).

Other examples of Sarmatian burials inserted into earlier Bronze Age kurgans are discussed by Berestnev and Medvedev for the Don–Volga forest–steppe in the Early Sarmatian period (Berestnev and Medvedev 2015), and by Simonenko for catacomb graves in the North Pontic region (A.V. Simonenko 1995). These include Zhemchuzhnoe, grave 3, barrow 2; Porogi, grave 1, barrow 1; Shiroka Balka, grave 11, barrow 2; and Maievka, grave 1, barrow 1 (A.V. Simonenko 1995, pp. 345–46). Two further cases, Kolpakovka, grave 8, barrow 3, and Priadovka, grave 13, barrow 1, remain chronologically and culturally uncertain and should therefore be treated with caution (A.V. Simonenko 1995, p. 348). Simonenko also observes that secondary Sarmatian burials are especially important for the Early and Middle Sarmatian periods: all catacombs of these phases were constructed within earlier barrows, whereas from the middle of the third to the fourth century CE catacombs changed their stratigraphic position and became primary burials under individual barrows (A.V. Simonenko 1995, p. 353).

Some regional and chronological variation can also be observed when steppe and forest–steppe environments are compared. In the forest–steppe Don–Volga interfluvium, the earliest Sarmatian presence (dated to not earlier than the beginning of the second century BCE) is represented by a very small number of intrusive burials, chance finds of swords with crescent-shaped pommels, and so-called “hoards” or “strange” complexes. These Early Sarmatian burials were located mainly in the border zone between the steppe and the forest–steppe. By the Middle Sarmatian period, however, a clearer distinction becomes visible: in the forest–steppe, Sarmatian cemeteries usually developed in new locations, whereas in the steppe zone Sarmatian graves more often formed part of long-accumulating cemeteries, frequently through additional burials inserted into earlier barrows, usually of the Bronze Age (Berestnev and Medvedev 2015, p. 10).

The Sarmatian evidence therefore shows that intrusive reuse was not exceptional, but formed a significant component of regional mortuary practice. At the same time, the meaning of such insertions varied. In some cases, they may reflect movement into new territories; in others, they may indicate the continuing funerary value of older barrows as visible

and symbolically charged features of the landscape. Environmental factors may also have influenced the choice of intrusive burial in older kurgans rather than primary burial under newly constructed mounds, and this practice appears to have been closely associated with the steppe world.

3.1.5. Multi-Period Biographies and Later Reuse

The combination of a Sarmatian burial and a later medieval burial in Kurgan 12 at Hlinaia (Glinoe) demonstrates that a single mound could remain funereally meaningful across widely separated periods. The same phenomenon is visible at Kovalevka, where in Kurgan 13 a medieval burial was located above disturbed Sarmatian remains (Klepikov 2019, p. 42). Such cases show that intrusive reuse could form part of a much longer sequence of post-funerary engagement, rather than representing a single isolated episode.

Mamai-Hora provides another important example of multi-period reuse. The cemetery as a whole had a long history, extending from the Neolithic to the Medieval period, although its Scythian phase reached its greatest intensity between the late fifth and early third century BCE. Andrukh and Toshchev date the beginning of the Scythian cemetery to the end of the seventh or the beginning of the sixth century BCE, identify its main phase in the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and place its final stage in the first third of the third century BCE (Andrukh and Toshchev 2012, pp. 276, 279).

At Mamai-Hora, secondary burial practices appear in two related but distinct forms. First, several Scythian burials were inserted into three Eneolithic/Bronze Age barrows among the 358 Scythian burials identified in 175 kurgans (Andrukh and Toshchev 2012, p. 276). Second, additional or secondary burials (дозахоронения/*dozakhoroneniia*) were placed within already existing Scythian funerary constructions. These were relatively rare, accounting for approximately 1.5% of the burials, and were inserted either through the original entrance shaft or through a newly cut shaft; in some cases, the later burial was placed directly in the entrance shaft itself. The authors further note that the interval between the primary burial and the secondary interment can sometimes be reconstructed from the treatment of the earlier skeleton: the bones of the first deceased may remain undisturbed, partly overlapped, slightly displaced, arranged in anatomical order, or scattered (Andrukh and Toshchev 2012, p. 277). Mamai-Hora is therefore especially valuable because it distinguishes between insertion into much older mounds and secondary use within the Scythian funerary horizon.

A related but more unusual and ambiguous case is Vinogradnoe 7, kurgan 2, discussed by Limberis and Marchenko. The feature excavated as kurgan 2 proved to be a natural hillock into which burials were inserted over a prolonged period, from the Bronze Age to the Early Middle Ages. Although it was not originally an artificial barrow, it functioned as a prominent mound-like landmark that repeatedly attracted mortuary activity. The displacement of earlier bones within the funerary structure indicates repeated episodes of re-entry and reworking at a smaller, intra-tomb scale (Limberis and Marchenko 2007, pp. 229–30). Vinogradnoe 7 thus shows that what mattered in some cases was not whether an elevation was artificial or natural, but whether it was recognised as an appropriate and meaningful locus for burial.

Early medieval steppe burials in Eastern Europe further confirm the long-term persistence of intrusive reuse. In their analysis of early medieval nomadic burials from the eastern Azov region, Sokolov and Gulyás note that about 80% of graves of this period were dug into earlier, mainly Bronze Age and Iron Age barrows. Such intrusive burials were usually placed either in the centre of the mound or in its north-northeastern sector (Sokolov and Gulyás 2023, p. 35). Udarnyi-I, Grave 6, represents an early medieval intrusive burial dug into the fill of an earlier kurgan originally erected over Grave 4. Although

neither Grave 4 nor the primary mound is independently dated in the article, the excavators explicitly state that the early medieval grave was inserted into the existing mound. The intrusive burial itself is attributed to the post-Hunnic horizon, probably the fifth to sixth centuries CE, on the basis of its rite, including north–south orientation, a horse skin deposit, and artificial cranial deformation (Sokolov and Gulyás 2023, pp. 32, 35, 45). These examples show that intrusive reuse continued well beyond the Scythian and Sarmatian horizons. Older kurgans and mound-like elevations remained active components of mortuary landscapes, repeatedly selected by later communities as visible, meaningful, and archaeologically durable places for burial.¹⁰

The evidence reviewed in this section shows that intrusive reuse was not a marginal or isolated phenomenon. It occurred across several chronological horizons, from the reuse of Eneolithic and Bronze Age mounds by Scythian and Sarmatian communities to early medieval insertions into earlier barrows. In some cases, intrusive burial appears to have been connected with the practical reuse of visible elevations. In others, especially where older mound clusters were selected at moments of territorial expansion or cultural transformation, it more likely expressed claims to memory, ancestry, or landscape. Intrusive reuse should therefore be treated as a flexible practice whose meaning depended on chronology, stratigraphy, and the cultural relationship between the later burial and the earlier monument.

3.2. Type II—Associative Reuse and Landscape Appropriation

Associative reuse is understood here as the appropriation of older barrows within the cultural landscape without the insertion of new burials into the earlier monument itself. Existing mounds could function as landmarks, boundaries, points of reference, axes of movement, and anchor points for later funerary or settlement activity. Their visibility enabled acts of demarcation and orientation, while the placement of new mounds or graves near older ones generated clustered monumental landscapes. In Semple’s terminology, this constitutes “associative reuse,” that is, the location of new burials near earlier monuments rather than within them (Semple 2008, p. 411; see also Demina 2024, p. 102). Semple and Crewe also suggest that such practices may be especially significant in contexts where authority was negotiated through local landmarks (Semple 2008, p. 415; Crewe 2012, p. 18).¹¹ In the North Pontic context, this provides a useful comparative model for examining how older and newer kurgans acted as spatial anchors, markers of visibility, demarcation, and clustering, structuring movement through the landscape and materialising claims to territory without requiring intrusive reuse.

A particularly clear North Pontic example is provided by Demina’s spatial analysis of barrow clusters. In her study area, all major spatial clusters had already formed during the Early Bronze Age, and later burial activity developed within these inherited concentrations (Demina 2024, p. 105). Scythian barrows were regularly placed close to earlier Bronze Age mounds: the median distance to the nearest Bronze Age barrow was 97 m, the minimum observed distance was 26 m, and in 23% of cases a Bronze Age mound was the nearest barrow to a Scythian one. Demina interprets this pattern as evidence that older barrows served as reference points in the initial stages of Scythian barrow construction (Demina 2024, p. 107). The Vovchanske 1 group is especially illustrative: the earliest Scythian barrows, dated to the late fifth century BCE, were positioned closer to Bronze Age mounds, whereas later Scythian barrows extended farther away. This suggests an initial orientation toward older monuments, followed by the gradual expansion of a new Scythian funerary group (Demina 2024, p. 107). In this sense, older barrows could function as focal points for the creation of new ceremonial spaces even where no direct intrusion occurred.

Demina's analysis also shows that associative reuse was not limited to the Scythian period. For the Zrubna phase, she notes cases in which new mounds were constructed between two older barrows, thereby producing larger composite monuments, as at Davydivka 1, Davydivka 2, and Velyky Kurhan near Volodymyrivka. These examples show not merely the addition of new burials, but the deliberate reconfiguration of spatial relations between monuments through the creation of what might be termed "super-mounds" (Demina 2024, pp. 111–12). Such cases demonstrate that associative reuse could operate through spatial composition and monument clustering, rather than through physical insertion into an earlier mound.

A broader landscape perspective is reinforced by the work of Topal and Johnson. In the region between the Dniester, Prut, and Danube rivers, Topal shows that kurgans were distributed in linear chains, sometimes 20–30 km long, situated on watersheds and oriented parallel to rivers and other water sources. He suggests that these lines may have been connected with ancient roads, trackways, and migration routes. In this sense, kurgans functioned as socio-cultural markers indicating the presence, and perhaps the boundaries, of cultural communities. Such necropoleis may also be understood as monumental "cities of the dead" created by societies that left few permanent settlements (Topal 2019, pp. 31–32).

Johnson, working on a much wider scale from the Tuva–Altai–Sayan region through Kazakhstan and the North Caucasus to the lower Dnipro region, similarly argues that kurgans should be understood as visual culture and as components of deliberately produced moundscapes, rather than simply as individual tombs. His viewshed analysis suggests that visibility operated differently across ecological zones: in mountainous areas it was more local and regional, whereas on the open steppe it became increasingly regional and pan-regional. In the lower Dnipro region, monumental mounds such as Aleksandropol and Chertomlyk commanded exceptionally wide views and dominated the surrounding landscape (Johnson 2024, pp. 15–18). Particularly important is Johnson's argument that the cumulative effect of dense kurgan concentrations mattered more than any single mound. Travellers moving along overland routes, or even along the Dnipro itself, would have been aware that they were passing through a deliberately produced "landscape of the dead" (Johnson 2024, pp. 15, 20–21).

A comparable perspective is offered by the survey work in the Kerch region published by Smekalov, Ermolin, Koltukhov, Lantsov, and Lentovskii. Their comparison of field documentation with topographic maps treats barrow groups not simply as burial sites, but as enduring and mappable features of the landscape. They describe kurgan necropoleis as among the most widespread sacral archaeological monuments directly observable in Crimea and show that such moundscapes could remain legible even where individual barrows had been heavily altered, reduced to slight micro-elevations, or survived only as circular colour traces on ploughed land (Smekalov et al. 2007, pp. 71–75). Particularly important is their observation that dense kurgan groups were often more readily identifiable than isolated mounds, while only about half of the surviving barrows were reliably reflected on available maps (Smekalov et al. 2007, p. 76).

Smekalov and his co-authors also introduce the useful category of "kurgan-like elevations" (кургановидные возвышения/*kurganovidnye vozvysheniya*), which includes both heavily altered barrows and natural rises on which ancient tombs may once have been constructed (Smekalov et al. 2007, pp. 71–72). This category has wider implications for the study of funerary landscapes. It suggests that, in antiquity, mound-like prominences—whether fully artificial or only partly anthropogenic—could function in ways similar to funerary landmarks. What mattered was not always the strict distinction between natural and constructed elevation, but the visibility and mnemonic potential of the raised

feature itself, as also suggested by Vinogradnoe 7, where Kurgan 2 was formed around a natural hillock.

The site of Koshary, situated on the right bank of the Tiligul Liman near its outlet into the Black Sea, provides a particularly instructive case of landscape appropriation within the context of Greek *apoikiai*. It shows how a Greek rural community at the western border of the Olbian chora incorporated older barrow monuments into a new funerary and symbolic order. The sacred topography of the necropolis was organised in relation to older Eneolithic/Bronze Age kurgans and to the route leading toward the steppe, while one of the largest mounds delineated the northern edge of the cemetery and served as a landmark on the road to the settlement (Redina 2007, p. 95). In this respect, older barrows functioned as inherited landmarks that structured the funerary landscape and were consciously reinscribed within a new Greek mortuary sphere.

Redina suggests that the inhabitants of Koshary may have lacked the means to construct large kurgans of their own and therefore made pragmatic use of older mounds instead. Yet the pattern is not merely pragmatic. It also indicates the symbolic incorporation of pre-existing monuments into the spatial order of the Greek chora. A comparable practice of using kurgans to demarcate necropolis territory is also attested in the Classical-period necropolis of Olbia, where contemporary burial mounds served this function (Redina 2007, p. 96).

A second, related form of associative clustering developed within the necropolis itself, located 500 m north and north-west of the settlement of Koshary. There, barrow no. 55 became the focal point of a deliberately organised funerary cluster. This fourth-/third-century BCE mound, whose architecture Chochorowski relates to Scythian tradition, was enclosed by a circular ditch with two opposing openings and contained two central niche graves: Grave 55A, belonging to a young individual, and Grave 55B, a child burial (Chochorowski 2008, pp. 26–28). Around it, a circle of 36 later graves developed over more than a century; on the basis of radiocarbon dating, Chochorowski cautiously estimated the duration of this process at 121 years (Chochorowski 2008, p. 38). He interpreted the arrangement as the spatial expression of a socially coherent community and presumed that the young individual buried in barrow no. 55 may have acquired the status of a local hero or mythical forefather (Chochorowski 2008, p. 28).

Although Koshary was a Greek rural settlement integrated into the Olbian administrative and economic sphere, its necropolis developed through practices intelligible across both Greek and steppe cultural horizons. This is reflected in the fact that local funerary practice incorporated elements associated with steppe traditions, including not only the Scythian-like architecture of barrow no. 55, but also westward orientation of the deceased, the provision of grave goods or offerings, and the lining of graves with reed and felt cloth (Chochorowski 2008, p. 37). Of special importance is warrior burial 107, the grave of a strongly built adult male aged around thirty, which displays features often linked with Sarmatian funerary custom, such as eastward orientation, crossed and bound ankles, and the remains of leather straps used to keep the legs together (Chochorowski 2008, pp. 26, 32).

Koshary should therefore not be reduced to a simple Greek/barbarian opposition. Rather, it offers an important example of cross-cultural kurgan reuse in the buffer zone of the Greek chora, where both the appropriation of older barrows and the later clustering of graves around barrow no. 55 contributed to the formation of a new funerary landscape of memory, identity, and community within a syncretic but culturally coherent social milieu.

The evidence reviewed in this section shows that associative reuse did not require physical intrusion into an earlier mound. It could operate through proximity, visibility, alignment, clustering, demarcation, and the incorporation of older monuments into new spatial systems. In the North Pontic region, this process is visible both in steppe contexts,

where new barrows were added to inherited mound clusters, and in cultural contact zones, where older kurgans could be reinterpreted as landmarks within Greek rural funerary landscapes. Associative reuse therefore demonstrates that kurgans shaped social memory not only as burial containers, but also as durable landscape forms through which communities organised space, expressed identity, and made claims to territory.

3.3. Type III—Reuse Through Reopening, Destruction, and Looting

The final type of kurgan reuse comprises cases in which a mound was intentionally reopened in a later period, but where the diagnostic feature is re-entry, destruction, or removal rather than the insertion of a new burial. The motives behind such interventions were varied and may have included looting, post-funerary ritual practices, and the deliberate destruction or manipulation of earlier interments. Archaeologically, such episodes are most commonly identified through shafts, tunnels, reopened chambers, and other traces of re-entry into the mound or burial structure. This form of reuse is often associated with selective destruction, incomplete removal of grave goods or human remains, and, in some cases, multiple episodes of intrusion. Type III may also overlap with other forms of reuse. At Koshary, for example, the associative clustering of graves around barrow no. 55 coexisted with disturbance of the central burial zone, since Chochorowski states explicitly that the larger central grave, burial 55A, had been entirely robbed (Chochorowski 2008, p. 26).

3.3.1. Robbery and Near-Contemporary Reopening of Scythian Kurgans

In the North Pontic region, robbery was not an occasional anomaly but one of the defining features of the archaeological record of Scythian kurgans. As Polin notes, earlier estimates for six well-researched cemeteries in steppe Scythia suggested that between 70 and 100% of the kurgans had been robbed, while only the poorest burials survived intact (Polin 2017, p. 527). He further argues that many Scythian kurgans were plundered already in antiquity, often by contemporaries of the burial or by people with direct knowledge of the funerary ceremony and the internal topography of the mound. The precision of robber tunnels, especially in reaching hidden side graves in large barrows, strongly suggests exact prior knowledge of burial architecture and the location of valuables; on this basis, Polin supports the view that many early robberies were carried out by contemporaries, perhaps even by specialized groups of professional robbers (Polin 2017, pp. 527–28). He also argues that some famous burials once thought to have been looted much later may in fact have been plundered only a few years after burial. A key example is the robbed northern chamber of Haimanova Mohyla (Gaimanova Mogila), where animal bones thrown out of a bronze cauldron had turned green from bronze oxides. Since such traces could have formed within a relatively short period, especially before the chamber roof collapsed, Polin concludes that at least some Scythian burials were robbed soon after interment rather than centuries later (Polin 2017, p. 528).

The history of robbery was often layered: many kurgans were robbed more than once, and the same mound could preserve evidence of several successive episodes of re-entry. Large barrows such as Aleksandropol, Oguz, Tovsta Mohyla, Babina Mohyla, and Sobol-eva Mohyla offer good examples of such multi-episodic robbery, with top-entry robberies stratigraphically later than earlier side-entry ones (Polin 2017, p. 531). Important exceptions must also be noted: some side-entry robberies are certainly modern, some top-entry robberies already occurred in antiquity, and some ancient robber tunnels were later reused by more recent robbers (Polin 2017, pp. 530–31).

Polin also stresses that profit, especially the extraction of precious-metal objects, was a major motive in many cases. This is determined from the archaeological pattern of disturbance: robbers often reached burial chambers with considerable precision, removed the

most valuable and recognisable objects, and left behind only small items that had been overlooked, lost or trapped in collapsed deposits. Conversely, poor Scythian burials were less frequently disturbed, which suggests that the expectation of valuable grave goods played a central role in selecting targets for robbery (Polin 2017, pp. 531–33).

3.3.2. Sarmatian Robberies: Selectivity, Method, and Documentation

A more nuanced and methodologically self-conscious discussion of ancient reopening is provided by Yatsenko in his study of synchronous robberies of Sarmatian barrows in the Don basin. He emphasizes that not every disturbed burial can automatically be classified as robbery, yet argues that, in many cases, robbery remains the most plausible explanation on the present evidence (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 25–26). One of the most important contributions of the article is methodological: Yatsenko notes that ancient grave robbery has often been inadequately studied because field documentation is too imprecise, with robber trenches poorly recorded, rarely classified, and almost never analysed with regard to the treatment of bones and grave goods, traces of the robbers' own activity in the mound, or the tools, food remains, and lighting associated with their work (Yatsenko 2013, p. 25). He further argues that the persistent threat of robbery itself shaped Sarmatian funerary practice, contributing to such features as the relatively small size of many rich barrows, the displacement of the main burial away from the centre at the beginning of the Late Sarmatian period, the use of hidden caches in grave walls or floors, and even and the reverse filling of the grave pit, in which the excavated soils were replaced in reverse order so as to disguise the entrance by recreating the appearance of undisturbed ground (Yatsenko 2013, p. 26). In this sense, robbery appears not merely as a post-burial event, but as a factor actively structuring mortuary behaviour.

Yatsenko's main interpretive hypothesis is that if the pattern of robbery within a cemetery is clearly selective, and if the intruders appear to have known the sex, age, and social status of the deceased, then at least many of these robberies were probably synchronous or near-synchronous, committed by people familiar with the funerary community itself (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 27–28). Robbery patterns vary considerably by region and period, but they are rarely random: in some cemetery groups young men and young women were targeted more frequently, in others elderly men appear particularly vulnerable, while children's burials were often left untouched or robbed much less often; certain categories, such as old women, could even be systematically avoided (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 28–30). The same selectivity is visible in the treatment of grave goods. Robbers were primarily interested in large or massive gold and silver objects, metal vessels, and, where possible, prestige weapons, whereas they often left behind arrows, wooden bowls without precious fittings, beads, spindle whorls, whetstones, ordinary knives, simple buckles and fibulae, and various ceramic vessels (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 29, 33). Richly decorated swords and daggers were usually removed, but older or more heavily corroded examples were sometimes left broken in the grave, and in some regions, especially on the Sal and Manych, bladed weapons appear to have been deliberately fragmented (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 32–33). At the same time, Yatsenko also points to exceptional cases, most notably the elite female burial in Sladkovka, kurgan 14, where, despite two robber entrances, many expensive and symbolically charged objects were left in place, including a belt embroidered with numerous gold plaques, a necklace with rare large amulets, a massive gold collar with griffin figures, gold earrings and a ring, as well as vessels, incense burners, and objects connected with cosmetics and ritual practices. He suggests that this unusually "delicate" robbery may reflect fear of ritually potent grave goods associated with a special category of aristocratic women (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 33–34).

Robber shafts and trenches varied considerably: sometimes they were dug wider than the grave pit, perhaps in search of caches in the walls; sometimes they followed the grave outline quite closely; in some cases the dromos was not dismantled at all (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 34–35). Traces of the robbers' own activity within the burial context are also noticeable: they may have lit small fires for illumination, in one case at Vysochino apparently fried small fish inside the grave pit (Yatsenko 2013, p. 39).¹² There is a noticeable difference between very thorough or "clean" robberies, in which almost everything was removed and even most of the bones were taken out, and less systematic intrusions, in which one corner of the grave, or even half of it, remained untouched; such differences may reflect both the known richness of the grave and the diligence or skill of particular robber groups (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 35–36). Especially important is the evidence for multi-episodic intrusion: at Sadovyi II, kurgan 52, grave 3, the burial was reopened no fewer than five times by shafts of different configurations, demonstrating that robbery itself could become a long-term and repeated process within the biography of a mound (Yatsenko 2013, p. 36).

Yatsenko's discussion of human remains is particularly relevant for distinguishing looting from other forms of destructive re-entry. He shows that robbers treated skeletons in many different ways: disarticulating bodies at the bottom of the grave, throwing bones into the fill, shifting skulls and leg bones, moving bones into corners, leaving only the lower legs in place, or preserving selected skeletal zones while disturbing others (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 37–38). He observes that bones of the legs or hip area often remained in situ, perhaps because the objects associated with them were of lesser interest, and suggests that skulls were sometimes treated with special caution or superstition, being either left in place or deliberately displaced away from the rest of the body (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 37–38). Even so, he rejects any simple model of systematic desecration of enemy or ethnically alien graves: the evidence is too selective, too informed, and too materially focused for that. He nevertheless allows that in some cases robbers may have acted against rival kin-groups or hostile families (Yatsenko 2013, pp. 38–40).

Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov develop this argument in their study of the methods and purposes of ancient looting in Sarmatian kurgans. They likewise emphasise the need for precise documentation of secondary shafts, bone displacement, and traces of the intruders' activity, while stressing the selective character of many interventions. Their analysis confirms that the primary targets were usually precious metals, metal vessels, prestige weapons, status symbols, and in some cases powerful amulets, whereas ordinary ceramics, buckles, spindle whorls, and other less valuable objects were often left behind. At the same time, they note that the treatment of human remains could involve gestures extending beyond the extraction of valuables, including the displacement or isolation of skulls and other forms of post-burial violence. Material gain remained the dominant explanation in most cases, but revenge, hostility, or symbolic neutralisation may also have played a role in specific contexts (Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov 2013, pp. 78–90).

3.3.3. Destructive Re-Entry and Targeted Violence Against the Body

(Klepikov 2023) provides a strong case for distinguishing destructive re-entry from ordinary looting. Analysing a group of high-status Middle Sarmatian burials in the Esaulovsky Aksai basin, he identifies a recurring pattern of partial destruction in which parts of the skeleton were disturbed, removed, or displaced, while other bones and much of the grave inventory remained in situ. This selective character of reopening is central to his argument: the burials were not emptied systematically, nor were the most valuable objects consistently removed. Instead, the evidence suggests that the body itself, rather than the assemblage, often became the principal target of intervention. Such cases are therefore difficult to explain as straightforward profit-driven robbery and are better understood as a

distinct form of destructive re-entry, possibly involving ritual desecration (Klepikov 2023, pp. 38–43).

The clearest example is Kovalevka, kurgan 25, burial 1, an elite Middle Sarmatian grave under a heavily ploughed mound. Part of the skeleton of an adult male remained in anatomical position, while another part had been cut through by a robber trench and redeposited in the south-eastern corner of the grave; the skull was missing. At the same time, much of the accompanying inventory remained untouched, including a large group of arrowheads, long iron knives, a silver buckle, and a niche deposit containing a bronze cauldron, grey-clay jugs, bits and cheekpieces, silver plaques and phalera, and sheep bones. The survival of this deposit is one of the main arguments against interpreting the burial as an ordinary robbed grave (Klepikov 2023, pp. 40–41).

Klepikov further strengthens this interpretation through internal comparison. At Kovalevka, kurgan 9 showed a partially damaged skeleton, a broken bronze cauldron in a niche, and another niche with an untouched wheel-made jug; kurgan 13 contained a male burial from which the skull, right forearm, and parts of the right leg had been removed from the body and found in the fill, while associated weapons and horse gear remained present and grey-clay pottery had been broken and thrown out of the grave. By contrast, kurgan 16, which contained three burials in a row and functioned as a kurgan/cemetery, showed no disturbance, and the same was true of the two burials under kurgan 20. This demonstrates that destructive re-entry was selective rather than universal: it affected specific elite Middle Sarmatian individual burials, whereas synchronous Early Sarmatian kurgan-cemeteries in the same region remained untouched (Klepikov 2023, pp. 41–43). The same model is extended to other elite Middle Sarmatian graves outside Kovalevka. Comparable patterns are noted at Oktyabrsky-V, Peregruznoe I, and Aksai II, where body parts were selectively displaced while inventories were not consistently removed. These parallels support Klepikov’s interpretation of a socially targeted form of post-burial violence rather than ordinary robbery (Klepikov 2023, pp. 38–43).¹³

3.3.4. Reopening as Violence Against Memory

Demina’s concept of “violence against memory” provides an important interpretive extension of Type III, reframing some acts of reopening as interventions aimed at transforming the social meaning of the dead and their monuments. In her diachronic study of barrow reuse in the Molochna basin, Demina argues that Scythian attitudes toward earlier Bronze Age barrows differed fundamentally from their treatment of barrows created within Scythian living memory. Whereas older barrows, perceived as anonymous monuments of a distant past, could be appropriated through associative or intrusive reuse, Scythian barrows themselves were rarely reused by contemporaries for secondary burial and were instead much more often reopened and destroyed (Demina 2024, pp. 115–20). She shows that this pattern was especially pronounced in central and spatially “prestigious” graves: in the broader Northern Azov dataset, 89.5% of burials located in the centre of a barrow had been robbed or otherwise destroyed, compared with only 35.6% of side burials, and in barrows containing several Scythian burials nearly all central graves were reopened (Demina 2024, pp. 116–17). Demina therefore proposes that such acts should be understood not only as treasure hunting, even though valuable objects and status regalia clearly mattered, but also as a form of symbolic aggression directed at the memory embodied in the burial. Because Scythian barrows commemorated identifiable individuals still present in communal memory, reopening and mutilation of central graves could function as an attack on the deceased’s posthumous authority and on the social claims attached to them. In this sense, destructive re-entry became a form of reuse through negation: a monument created for commemoration was turned into an instrument of forgetting, dis-

integration, and the violent reappropriation of memory, heritage, and land (Demina 2024, pp. 118–20).

A comparable problem has been widely discussed in Greek archaeology in relation to the distinction between tomb cult, ancestor cult, and hero cult, where later engagement with earlier graves has been interpreted not simply as mortuary practice, but as a means of negotiating memory, authority, and claims to the past (Morris 1988; Antonaccio 1994; Antonaccio 1995; Whitley 1988; Whitley 1994; Alcock 1991). Morris's classic study of tomb cult examines how eighth-century BCE Greeks used earlier, mainly Mycenaean, tombs as material points of reference to the past and as instruments of social authority. He argues that these tombs became active nodes through which later communities made the past present and usable in contemporary social and political conflicts. Their significance lay not in a generalized interest in Mycenaean culture, but in the presumed ancient persons buried there, whose tombs could serve as sources of authority and power. Later engagement with old graves could express claims to land, local identity, civic cohesion, aristocratic prestige, or political domination; it could also remain deeply ambiguous, allowing the same tomb to function both as a collective symbol of the polis and as a resource for elite claims to heroic or ancestral status (Morris 1988, pp. 750–52, 756–58). Antonaccio further refines this problem by distinguishing tomb cult from hero cult and by stressing that later activity at Bronze Age tombs did not necessarily imply the worship of identifiable epic heroes. In her view, the reuse of earlier tombs and the deposition of offerings at them could create ancestors through the adoption of ancient, often anonymous, dead, rather than through demonstrable genealogical continuity (Antonaccio 1994, pp. 396, 400, 403, 410).

The evidence reviewed in this section demonstrates that reopening was not a single phenomenon. It ranged from profit-driven robbery to highly selective interventions targeting bodies, objects, and the commemorative authority of the mound. In some cases, the aim was the extraction of valuables; in others, the pattern of disturbance suggests hostility, symbolic neutralisation, or the deliberate transformation of memory, a phenomenon also observable beyond the North Pontic region. Type III reuse therefore occupies an intermediate position between destruction and appropriation: by reopening, damaging, or selectively emptying earlier graves, later actors did not simply erase the monument, but actively reworked its social meaning.

Table 2 below presents the complex and often overlapping categories of kurgan reuse discussed in this study, together with their diachronic character. The number assigned to each case study corresponds to its numbering on Figure 1.

Table 2. Case studies of kurgan reuse: chronology and type of reuse.

Map No.	Site Name	Chronology	Reuse Type
1	Vovchanske 1 and Vovchanske 5	Bronze Age → Scythian	Type I; Type II
2	Davydivka 1–2/Velyky Kurhan near Volodymyrivka	Bronze Age → Zrubna	Type II
3	Hlinaia, “Sad” group, kurgan 12	Scythian → Sarmatian → Medieval	Type I; multi-period reuse
4	Prut–Dniester/Tiraspol–Chobruchi–Sputnik cluster	Earlier kurgans → Sarmatian	Type I
5	Mamai-Hora	Long-term multi-period use	Type I; multi-period reuse
6	Vinogradnoe 7, kurgan 2	Long-term multi-period use	Type I; place persistence
7	Koshary older barrows and barrow no. 55	Bronze Age → Greek chora	Type II; Type III

Table 2. *Cont.*

Map No.	Site Name	Chronology	Reuse Type
8	Kerch kurgan cluster: Tsarskyi Kurgan, Kul-Oba, Yuz-Oba, and Temir-Gora	Bosporan/Scythian → Post-antique	Type I; Type II; Type III; place persistence; multi-period reuse; post-antique appropriation
9	Aleksandropol Royal Kurgan	Scythian → Reopening/Robbery	Type III; ritual afterlife
10	Chertomlyk Royal Kurgan	Scythian → Reopening/Robbery	Type III; moundscape visibility
11	Haimanova Mohyla	Scythian → Reopening/Robbery	Type III
12	Oguz, Babina Mohyla, Soboleva Mohyla, and Tovsta Mohyla	Scythian → Reopening/Robbery	Type III
13	Kovalevka, kurgans 13 and 25	Sarmatian → Destructive re-entry	Type III; multi-period reuse
14	Oktyabrsky-V, Peregruznoe I, and Aksai II	Sarmatian → Destructive re-entry	Type III
15	Udarnyi-I, Grave 6	Earlier kurgan → Early Medieval	Type I; later intrusive reuse
16	Western Kazakhstan/North Caspian cluster: Shagan, Barbastau, Karasu, Alebastrova	Bronze Age → Sauromatian/Sarmatian	Type I

4. Discussion: Interpreting Kurgan Reuse

The material discussed in this study demonstrates that later communities often encountered pre-existing mounds not as neutral topographic features, but as places already marked by death, ancestry, and commemorative force. This is clearest in cases of intrusive burial, where a later interment was physically inserted into an earlier mound, but it is equally visible in associative reuse, where older kurgans structured the placement of later graves, barrows, or entire cemeteries. In both cases, the mound remained an active funerary medium rather than a passive remnant of the past. The following discussion argues that kurgan reuse in the Western Scythian world was shaped by the interaction of several main factors: the visibility and spatial authority of older mounds, the appropriation of memory and territory, practical and social constraints on funerary behaviour, and the role of reopening or destruction in conflicts over the dead and their commemorative power.

4.1. Kurgans as Monuments of Memory and Territorial Claim-Making

The first interpretive implication of the evidence discussed above concerns the role of kurgans as durable monuments of memory and territorial claim-making. This is visible in several practices: the insertion of later burials into older mounds, the clustering of new graves or barrows around pre-existing monuments, and the use of earlier kurgans as reference points for later spatial arrangements. In each case, the mound functioned not merely as a burial container, but as a persistent and visible marker around which new social meanings could be organized.

Such reuse did not require biological, ethnic, or cultural continuity between the builders of a mound and those who later engaged with it. What mattered was the mnemonic and spatial efficacy of acting in a place already charged with sepulchral significance. Older kurgans allowed later communities to situate themselves within an existing monumental landscape. By inserting burials into earlier mounds, placing new graves

nearby, or aligning new funerary spaces with older barrow clusters, later groups could establish a relationship with a past that was not necessarily genealogically their own, but could nevertheless be appropriated, reinterpreted, or claimed.

Demina's analysis of the Molochna basin is especially important in this regard. Her spatial study shows that Scythian reuse of Bronze Age barrows was not random: older mound clusters continued to structure later burial placement, and secondary Scythian burials in earlier barrows appeared approximately alongside the earliest newly constructed Scythian kurgans. Reuse therefore formed part of the initial establishment of a Scythian funerary landscape rather than a marginal or residual practice (Demina 2024, pp. 107, 112–15). In this context, burial in or near an older mound was not simply a practical choice. It created a visible claim to a landscape already marked by ancestral, even if anonymous, monuments.

In steppe environments, where durable architectural markers were relatively limited, burial mounds were among the most persistent signs of earlier occupation. Their visibility made them effective anchors for new cemeteries, boundaries, routes, and ceremonial spaces. Reusing them could therefore serve both commemorative and territorial purposes. Older kurgans provided material precedent and spatial authority for claims to land, precedence, and belonging. In this sense, kurgan reuse can be understood as a politics of the past: later communities used earlier monuments to naturalize their presence within a landscape and to transform inherited topographies into socially meaningful territories.

This logic is not limited to intrusive burial. Associative reuse, including the clustering of new barrows near older ones, could achieve similar effects without disturbing the earlier monument. The reuse of Bronze Age mound clusters in the Molochna basin, the organization of funerary space around inherited barrows at Koshary, and the broader moundscape patterns identified by Topal and Johnson all suggest that kurgans operated as landmarks through which communities structured movement, visibility, and collective memory. The significance of such practices lay not only in the individual mound, but in the cumulative effect of monumental landscapes that made social claims visible and durable (Chochorowski 2008; Redina 2007; Topal 2019; Johnson 2024).

4.2. Looting, Reopening, and the Problem of Motive

The interpretation of reopening and destruction depends above all on how motive is reconstructed. The evidence discussed above suggests that these interventions cannot be explained by a single model. They range from economically motivated looting to more selective, socially informed, and symbolically charged actions directed at bodies, objects, and the memory embodied in the mound. A useful interpretive sequence can therefore be traced from profit-driven robbery, through selective and informed intrusion, to targeted violence against the body and, finally, to violence against memory.

Polin's study of Scythian kurgan robbery in the North Pontic region strongly supports a profit-oriented model in many cases. Robber tunnels often show precise targeting of central graves and valuables; many kurgans were reopened more than once; and the dominant motive appears to have been the extraction of precious metal objects (Polin 2017, pp. 527–33). Importantly, Polin also warns against overinterpretation. Chamber collapse, later interference, and animal activity may produce traces similar to deliberate manipulation of the dead, and not every disturbed skeleton should therefore be interpreted as evidence of ritual "neutralization" or symbolic violence (Polin 2017, pp. 531–33). His position is methodologically important because it establishes profit as a basic explanatory model, while also setting limits on speculative ritual interpretations.

Yatsenko, and especially Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov, complicate this picture by showing that ancient robbery could itself be selective and socially informed. Their work

demonstrates that robbers often acted with detailed knowledge of the sex, age, and status of the deceased, regularly ignored some categories of objects while targeting others, and treated human remains in ways ranging from simple displacement to more patterned handling of bones and skulls (Yatsenko 2013; Yatsenko and Vdovchenkov 2013). In other words, “robbery” need not mean indiscriminate extraction. It could be informed, selective, and embedded in local social knowledge. This is methodologically important because selectivity alone does not automatically prove ritual or symbolic intent: it may also reflect practical knowledge of where valuable objects were placed, which burials were worth targeting, and which objects were considered worth removing.

Klepikov’s material marks a further step along this interpretive spectrum, because it identifies cases in which a purely economic reading becomes harder to sustain. In the elite Middle Sarmatian graves from the Esaulovsky Aksai basin, parts of the skeleton were removed or displaced while substantial grave inventories remained in place. In such cases, the body itself appears to have been the principal target of intervention (Klepikov 2023, pp. 38–43). This is where the distinction between looting and targeted desecration becomes analytically useful. If valuable objects were available but left behind, and if specific body parts were manipulated, then destructive re-entry cannot be explained solely in terms of profit. It may instead reflect hostility toward particular individuals or groups, ritualized aggression, or attempts to neutralize the social power of the dead.

Demina’s concept of “violence against memory” extends this logic from the body to the monument as a carrier of collective memory. In her interpretation, the destruction of central and prestigious Scythian graves was not merely a by-product of treasure hunting, but could also function as an attack on the posthumous authority of the deceased and on the social claims embodied by the mound. This is especially significant because Demina distinguishes between two different relationships to the past: older Bronze Age barrows, belonging to a distant and anonymous past, could be appropriated through intrusive or associative reuse, whereas Scythian barrows still embedded in living or near-living memory were more likely to become targets of destructive reopening (Demina 2024, pp. 116–20). In this sense, reopening and destruction could become strategies in conflicts over land, prestige, and resources.

Destruction, in such cases, was not the opposite of reuse, but one of its possible forms. By reopening, damaging, or selectively emptying a grave, later actors did not simply erase a monument from the landscape. They intervened in its biography, transforming its commemorative force and renegotiating its social meaning. Kurgan reuse therefore encompassed both appropriation and negation: older monuments could be claimed as anchors of memory and territory, but they could also be attacked when the memories they embodied remained socially or politically charged.

The safest methodological approach is not to oppose “economic” and “symbolic” explanations too rigidly, but to ask what the archaeological signature of each case actually supports. Crescioli’s broader comparative discussion encourages attention to the sequence, scale, and material patterning of post-burial interventions rather than assigning them too quickly to a single motive (Crescioli 2020, pp. 112, 119–21, 130–31). Several controls are therefore crucial: what was taken and what was left; whether the intervention focused on central or peripheral deposits; whether the disturbance is compatible with simple access to valuables; whether the body was selectively manipulated; whether re-entry occurred once or repeatedly; and whether the intervention targeted a monument that still belonged to living social memory. Only where such indicators converge should stronger claims about ritualized reopening, targeted desecration, or violence against memory be advanced.

The problem of motive should therefore be approached as a spectrum rather than as a binary choice between looting and ritual. Profit-driven robbery remains the most econom-

ical explanation in many cases, especially where precious metals and portable valuables were systematically removed. Yet selective intrusion, informed targeting, manipulation of human remains, and attacks on central or prestigious graves show that reopening could also operate as a social and mnemonic act.

4.3. *Practical and Social Constraints on Funerary Behaviour*

Practical and social constraints also played a role in shaping the reuse of kurgans, although they should not be treated as sufficient explanations in themselves. In some cases, the reuse of existing monumental features may have been partly conditioned by the availability of visible mounds, the labour required to construct new barrows, or the spatial organization of an already established funerary landscape. Redina's interpretation of Koshary is relevant in this regard. She suggests that a small rural community may not have possessed the resources necessary to construct large kurgans of its own and therefore made use of ancient mounds to demarcate its cemetery (Redina 2007, p. 96). Such a reading is plausible, especially in a peripheral context, where older monuments already offered ready-made landmarks within the local landscape.

Yet practical convenience cannot fully explain the pattern. The use of older kurgans at Koshary also involved the incorporation of inherited monuments into a new funerary and symbolic order. The older barrows were not merely available elevations; they structured the sacred topography of the necropolis, marked routes and boundaries, and contributed to the formation of a local mortuary identity. In this sense, practicality and symbolic appropriation should not be opposed too rigidly. The same act could be both economical and meaningful: an existing mound could reduce the need for new construction while simultaneously providing spatial authority, ancestral depth, and mnemonic force.

This point is methodologically important. The absence of newly constructed large mounds should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of poverty, limited labour, or lack of resources. Conversely, the reuse of older monuments should not always be elevated into an explicitly ideological act without contextual support. The relevant question is how practical constraints interacted with social and symbolic choices. Where older barrows were used to demarcate cemetery space, anchor clusters of later graves, or structure movement through the landscape, their reuse probably involved more than expediency alone.

A second dimension concerns social continuity within a family, household, or local community. As mentioned above, not all secondary or clustered burials necessarily represent diachronic reuse after a major cultural or chronological break. Some may instead reflect repeated use of a mound by the same or closely related social group. In such cases, the mound acquired what might be called a micro-biography: a sequence of additions, reopenings, or associated burials that extended its funerary significance without necessarily transforming it into a monument of distant ancestral appropriation.

This distinction is especially important for interpreting multiple burials within a single mound or clusters of graves arranged around a focal barrow. At Koshary, the development of graves around barrow no. 55 over more than a century may be understood not only as associative reuse, but also as the spatial expression of a socially coherent community organized around a central funerary focus (Chochorowski 2008, pp. 28, 38). Similarly, secondary burials inserted into existing funerary structures may reflect continuing mortuary practice within the same community rather than later appropriation by an unrelated group. Such cases should be distinguished from intrusive burials inserted into much older mounds after a significant chronological or cultural interval.

The key methodological risk is therefore twofold. On the one hand, practical or social continuity may be mistaken for long-term diachronic reuse; on the other, meaningful acts of landscape appropriation may be reduced too quickly to convenience. Close chronolog-

ical and stratigraphic control is essential for resolving this problem. The interpretation of any given case should depend on the relationship between burial phases, the degree of temporal separation, the continuity or discontinuity of funerary practice, and the spatial role played by the mound within the wider cemetery or landscape.

Practical constraints, social continuity, and symbolic appropriation should therefore be understood as overlapping rather than mutually exclusive factors. Kurgan reuse could be motivated by the availability of existing monuments, the desire to maintain a family or community burial focus, or the need to anchor a new funerary landscape in a visible and authoritative place. In many cases, these motives probably operated together. This is why reuse should be approached not as a single behaviour with a single cause, but as a flexible strategy shaped by resources, social organization, chronology, and the perceived authority of older monuments.

4.4. *Continuity, Discontinuity, and Place Persistence*

The long-term biography of a kurgan did not necessarily end when it ceased to function as an active burial monument. Some mounds continued to attract attention in later periods as ritual places, offering loci, landmarks, or durable sacred features within the landscape. This form of post-funerary engagement is more difficult to identify archaeologically than intrusive burial or destructive reopening, since it often leaves less visible material traces. It should therefore be recognised only where there is explicit contextual evidence, rather than inferred from the prominence of a mound alone.

A useful example is provided by the Aleksandropol Royal Kurgan, where later activity included medieval rituals and offerings associated with a stone stele (the so-called *baba*) of either Scythian or Cuman origin (Polin and Daragan 2018, pp. 342, 337). Such evidence suggests that the mound remained meaningful long after its original funerary function had ended. In this case, the kurgan was not reused through the insertion of a new burial, nor simply reopened for looting. Instead, it appears to have been reactivated as a place of ritual attention, where the monumental presence of the mound and associated stone figures continued to structure later practices. This kind of afterlife shows that kurgans could remain active within social and ritual landscapes even when they no longer served as burial containers.

This category of evidence broadens the concept of reuse beyond strictly mortuary activity. A kurgan could be appropriated as a point of orientation, a place of offering, an assembly point, or a sacred landmark. Such uses may not have required knowledge of the original burial or cultural identity of the mound's builders. What mattered was the continued legibility of the feature as an exceptional place in the landscape: elevated, visible, old, and already marked by human action. In this sense, non-mortuary appropriation represents a form of reuse based on the persistent authority of place rather than on renewed burial practice. The Tsarskyi Kurgan, situated in present-day Kerch, offers a good example of this type of later appropriation. Crosses and other drawings recorded on the walls along a passage leading from the vault of the dromos to the burial chamber attest to later interest in this fourth-century BCE kurgan, although the nature of this engagement remains uncertain. While an earlier account cited by Gaidukevich associated the crosses with the Genoese presence in the region,¹⁴ Zinko records another hypothesis, attributed to Gaidukevich, that the tomb may have served the earliest Christian community on the Bosphorus as a place of refuge and prayer (Gaidukevich 1981, pp. 27–30, Figure 7; Zinko 1998, p. 54).

A related but broader phenomenon is long-term place persistence. Some kurgans, flattened mounds, natural hillocks, and “kurgan-like elevations” acted as persistent attractors across widely separated periods. Later communities returned to them not necessarily

because they remembered the original burial event, but because the place remained visible, spatially meaningful, and appropriate for renewed mortuary or ritual action. Vinogradnoe 7, kurgan 2, is especially instructive in this regard. Although the feature proved to be a natural hillock rather than an artificial barrow in origin, it attracted burials from the Bronze Age to the Early Middle Ages (Limberis and Marchenko 2007). Its long biography suggests that what mattered was not simply its construction history, but its continued recognition as a mound-like landmark suitable for repeated funerary use. Mamai-Hora offers another important example of long-term place persistence. The cemetery as a whole was used from the Neolithic to the Medieval period, with a particularly intensive Scythian phase (Daragan et al. 2022). This multi-period sequence does not necessarily imply uninterrupted cultural continuity or stable collective memory across all phases. Rather, it shows that the same locality remained repeatedly attractive for burial over a very long duration.

Recurrence may result from the durable visibility of the place, its position in routes or settlement landscapes, or its general association with burial and ritual. However, place persistence does not always mean symbolic continuity. It may instead reflect the repeated reactivation of a topographically prominent and culturally available location. From a methodological point of view, ritual afterlife or long-term symbolic continuity should be based on careful contextual support. Evidence such as offering deposits, associated stelae, repeated non-burial activity (such as in the case of Aleksandropol), structured spatial arrangements, or clear multi-period sequences (such as in Mamai-Hora) can justify interpreting a mound as a persistent ritual or mnemonic focus.

Place persistence helps explain why kurgans could remain important across periods of major cultural discontinuity. Their long-term significance did not depend solely on continuous memory of the original dead. It depended on the capacity of the mound, or even a mound-like elevation, to remain legible as a marked place. Kurgans could therefore survive as attractors of burial, ritual, movement, and memory long after the communities that built them had disappeared. In this sense, the biography of a kurgan was shaped not only by continuity, but also by repeated discontinuous acts of recognition, appropriation, and return.

5. Conclusions

The evidence discussed in this article demonstrates that the biographies of kurgans in the Western Scythian world often extended across centuries. Later communities inserted new burials into older mounds, organised cemeteries around pre-existing barrows, re-opened graves, removed or manipulated objects and human remains, and reused mound-like landmarks as persistent places of funerary and ritual significance.

Chronologically, this reuse was not confined to a single period. Earlier Eneolithic and Bronze Age barrows formed the inherited monumental background against which later practices unfolded. In some cases, already within the Yamnaya and Catacomb horizons, existing mound structures attracted additional burials, although such cases require careful distinction between primary mortuary programmes, sequential use, and later reuse in the stricter sense. By the Scythian period, especially from the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE, older Bronze Age barrows and mound clusters could be incorporated into the creation of new funerary landscapes. This occurred both through intrusive burial and through associative reuse, in which new Scythian barrows were placed in relation to older monuments.

In the Sarmatian period, intrusive reuse became particularly visible. Sarmatian burials were frequently inserted into earlier kurgans, including Bronze Age and Scythian mounds, and in some regions such burials outnumbered primary kurgan burials. These practices continued across the Early and Middle Sarmatian phases and, in some cases,

formed part of longer multi-period sequences in which the same mound was later reused again in the medieval period. Early medieval insertions into earlier Bronze Age, Iron Age, or Sarmatian barrows further demonstrate that the attraction of older mounds persisted well beyond the Scythian and Sarmatian horizons.

The proposed typology distinguishes three major forms of reuse: intrusive mortuary reuse, associative reuse or landscape appropriation, and reuse through reopening, destruction, or looting. These categories are analytically useful, but they should not be treated as rigid or mutually exclusive. A single mound could be inserted into, clustered around, reopened, robbed, and later reactivated in different ways at different moments in its biography. The same archaeological signature may also reflect different social practices, which is why interpretation must be based on cumulative criteria: stratigraphy, chronology, access routes, treatment of the body, selectivity of artefact removal, spatial relationships, and the broader landscape context.

The reuse of kurgans was shaped by several overlapping factors. Practical considerations, such as the availability of visible mounds and the labour required to construct new monuments, may have mattered in some cases. Yet reuse cannot be reduced to convenience. Older kurgans were durable and visible places already charged with sepulchral significance. They could anchor cemeteries, structure routes and boundaries, legitimate territorial claims, express continuity within a family or community, or enable later groups to appropriate a past that was not necessarily genealogically their own.

Reopening and destruction also formed part of these long biographies. While many cases of kurgan robbery were clearly motivated by profit, especially the extraction of precious metals, other cases reveal more selective and socially informed patterns. In some Sarmatian contexts, the body itself appears to have been the principal target of intervention; in others, reopening may have functioned as an attack on the memory and posthumous authority embodied in the mound. Destruction was therefore not always the opposite of reuse. In some cases, it was a form of reuse through negation, in which the monument was re-entered in order to transform, contest, or erase its commemorative force.

Kurgan reuse in the Western Scythian world should therefore be understood as a long-term and multi-layered process. From the reuse of Eneolithic and Bronze Age mounds by Scythian and Sarmatian communities to early medieval and later engagements with the same monumental landscapes, kurgans remained persistent attractors of burial, memory, movement, and conflict. Their significance lay not only in the original burial event, but in the repeated acts through which later communities reactivated, appropriated, contested, and transformed them over time.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this paper has been published and can be found in the referenced sources. Further inquiries can be directed to the author.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my gratitude to the editor of this volume, Caspar Meyer, for inviting me to contribute to it, and for drawing my attention to the discussion of tomb cult in ancient Greece. I would also like to thank my dear friend Lee Richards for proofreading the paper. All remaining shortcomings are my own responsibility.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

¹ For rich museum exhibition catalogues see, e.g., (Trofimova 2007; Seipel 2009; Simpson and Pankova 2017).

- 2 Rich literature on this subject includes (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999); for the archaeology of memory and landscape, see (Bradley 2001; Bradley 2002).
- 3 See (Daragan et al. 2022, p. 398) for further literature. For a thorough analysis of Greco-Scythian art found in the elite kurgans of the North Pontic region in relation to ancient and modern Eurasian identity, see (Meyer 2013); for the history of research from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century in Southern Russia, see (Tunkina 2002; Tunkina 2003).
- 4 The bibliography on this subject is vast: see, e.g., (Shcheglov and Katz 1991; Fedoseev 2007; Vinogradov et al. 2012; Butyagin and Vinogradov 2014). Particularly useful for non-Russian speakers on the Bosporean elite kurgans around Kerch is (Meyer 2013, pp. 311–71), whose concise appendix surveys the richest fifth- and fourth-century BCE Bosporean elite kurgans, including Kul-Oba, Yuz-Oba, and related Kerch-area monuments.
- 5 Ref. (Topal 2019; Johnson 2024). Outside the North Pontic context, this topic has also been studied by (Fontijn et al. 2013; Darvill 2013) who examine prehistoric and Bronze Age monumentality in Europe, including barrows, tumuli, kurgans, and other monumental forms, with particular attention to how such monuments structured landscapes, shaped perception, and acquired long-term social and mnemonic significance.
- 6 See the analysis of such activities by (Yatsenko 2013 for Sarmatian materials; Polin 2017) for Scythian materials; for a cross-cultural approach, see (Crescioli 2020).
- 7 The authors refer to the passage in Herodotus in which the Sauromatians are explicitly mentioned (*Hdt.* 4.116) (Gursoy and Sizdikov 2022, p. 25). As Tokhtas'ev has argued, although the ethnonyms *Sarmatai* and *Sauromatai* derive from the same Iranian source, they did not denote the same people and were not contemporaneous terms (Tokhtas'ev 2005, p. 299).
- 8 These earlier cases are not always intrusive reuse in the strict sense adopted here, but they demonstrate the long-standing practice of adding burials to existing mound structures.
- 9 Simonenko further notes that the closest regional parallels include intrusive burial 3/31 near Tiraspol (first–second centuries CE), Chobruchi 1/1 in Slobodzeya district (second–third centuries CE), kurgan 1 of the “Sputnik” group near Tiraspol (second half of the second century CE), and intrusive burials 2/1 and 38/2 near Hlinaia (Glinoye) (S.O. Simonenko 2019, p. 177).
- 10 Comparable patterns are attested in early and middle Anglo-Saxon England, where prehistoric barrows were reused both by intrusive burial and by associative spatial arrangement (Semple 2008, p. 412, Table 1). Crewe's discussion of Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows in settlement contexts provides useful parallels: Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire, where twenty-three seventh-century inhumations were arranged in an arc around a Bronze Age barrow; Standlake, Oxfordshire, where at least four Anglo-Saxon graves were cut into the centre of “Mound 17,” already reused in the Iron Age; and Pea Low/Steep Lowe, Alstonefield, Staffordshire, where fifth- to seventh-century burials were inserted into an earlier, apparently Bronze Age barrow, one accompanied by spear- or lanceheads, a knife, and three Roman brass coins (Crewe 2012, pp. 282–83). A broader parallel is provided by Nuragic Sardinia, where Bronze Age nuraghi—monumental stone towers—were repurposed for funerary use in later periods, particularly during the Byzantine period (Trudu et al. 2016; especially Serra 2016, pp. 360–61). A regional study of the Tyne–Forth area in northern Britain likewise demonstrates that the funerary reoccupation of earlier monuments was a recurring practice between the fifth and eighth centuries. The monuments selected included prehistoric barrows, Iron Age settlements, and Roman forts, with the reuse of Bronze Age barrows particularly characteristic of the south-eastern part of the region; prominent examples include Capheaton, Copt Hill, and Yeavinger (Orsini 2017, pp. 261–72).
- 11 At Whitehorse Hill, Uffington, two Anglo-Saxon bowl barrows were aligned with an earlier Bronze Age barrow on a hilltop (Crewe 2012, p. 283). Crewe also discusses the political and ideological use of older mounds as “speech-mounds” and “assembly mounds,” including Spellow Hills and Moat Lowe, where prehistoric monuments functioned as authoritative places for judgement, assembly, and power (Crewe 2012, pp. 21–22, 283). Semple's Sussex material also provides particularly close analogies for Type II reuse. She defines associative burial as burials clustering around an older monument, including primary Anglo-Saxon barrows constructed in immediate proximity to prehistoric monuments (Semple 2008, p. 411). This includes Blackpatch, Sullington, Friday's Church, Perry Hill, and Clapham as possible cases of such associative groupings (Semple 2008, pp. 414–15). Semple further argues that associative funerary practices may reflect communities seeking to tie themselves to the landscape, signal continuity of landownership, and anchor themselves in visible ancient places without the more forceful act of cutting into an older mound. In this respect, she contrasts associative burial with intrusive burial, which she interprets as a more aggressive mode of monument reuse (Semple 2008, p. 415). Orsini similarly interprets the funerary reoccupation of earlier monuments in the Tyne–Forth region as an active engagement with the inherited landscape, through which communities articulated local identities, social status, and claims to territory (Orsini 2017, pp. 283–98, 304–7).
- 12 At a later stage, the pit also yielded traces of subsequent intrusions: a jug made in nearby Azak, attributable to robbers of the Golden Horde period, and a broken vodka bottle left by their nineteenth-century “colleagues” (Yatsenko 2013, p. 39).
- 13 In Oktyabrsky-V, kurgan 1, only the skull and left arm remained undisturbed, while the rest of the skeleton had been gathered into a neat pile; in Peregruznoe I, kurgan 45, burial 3, an elite female burial preserved its inventory but had a detached skull with traces of trepanation and tibiae found in the fill; and in Aksai II, kurgan 34, burial 1, the deceased woman lay in an unusual position pressed against the wall, which Klepikov interprets as a possible displacement of the corpse after burial. On this basis,

he suggests that the observed pattern may reflect a specific historical conflict in the Don–Volga interfluvium around the turn of the era: a group with Middle Sarmatian burial traditions entered a territory occupied by local Early Sarmatian groups, and the graves of these newcomers, especially high-status individual burials, were later desecrated by local populations. This, however, should not be treated as a universal explanation for all disturbed graves, but rather a historically specific interpretation of a selective and socially targeted form of post-burial violence directed against rival or alien dead (Klepikov 2023, pp. 38–43).

- 14 Gaidukevich cites Ashik's (1848, vol. 2, p. 28ff., pl. I) *Vosporskoe Tsarstvo*, where Ashik associated the crosses on the walls of the opened tomb with the Genoese presence in Crimea and praised their ability to open kurgans without leaving visible traces. Gaidukevich notes that Ashik still could not reconcile himself to the absence of the expected "treasures," but he himself regarded the form of the crosses as earlier than the Genoese period and interpreted them as evidence for an earlier penetration into the burial structure of the Tsarskyi Kurgan (Gaidukevich 1981, pp. 26–27, note 42).

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