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Thirty Steps of the Be-JA Road

The tomb at Dolno Lukovo – architecture and decoration

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ABSTRACT

The tomb near the village of Dolno Lukovo was found during rescue excavations in 1992, and it is remarkable for its architecture and, especially, its decoration. It consists of a burial chamber almost quadrangular in plan, with south facing entrance, an antechamber opened to the south and a dromos whose length is not defined. The chamber and the antechamber are built on a crepidoma made from nicely cut marble slabs of various sizes. The chamber has a pitched roof, consisting of four pairs of solid lime blocks. The antechamber is narrower and lower than the chamber. Each of the walls is made from two lime blocks with a rusticated frontal face. The roof is similar to the one of the chamber but it consists of two pairs of blocks. The dromos is made from local crushed stones bound by clay. Its walls are leaning outwards probably to support the soil cover of the mound. The interior of the tomb near the village of Dolno Lukovo was covered with mortar plaster. Small pieces of it have survived and have been found *in situ*.

KEYWORDS

tomb with gabled roof, tomb with coloured mortar plaster, relief figures, Hellenistic period

The tumulus

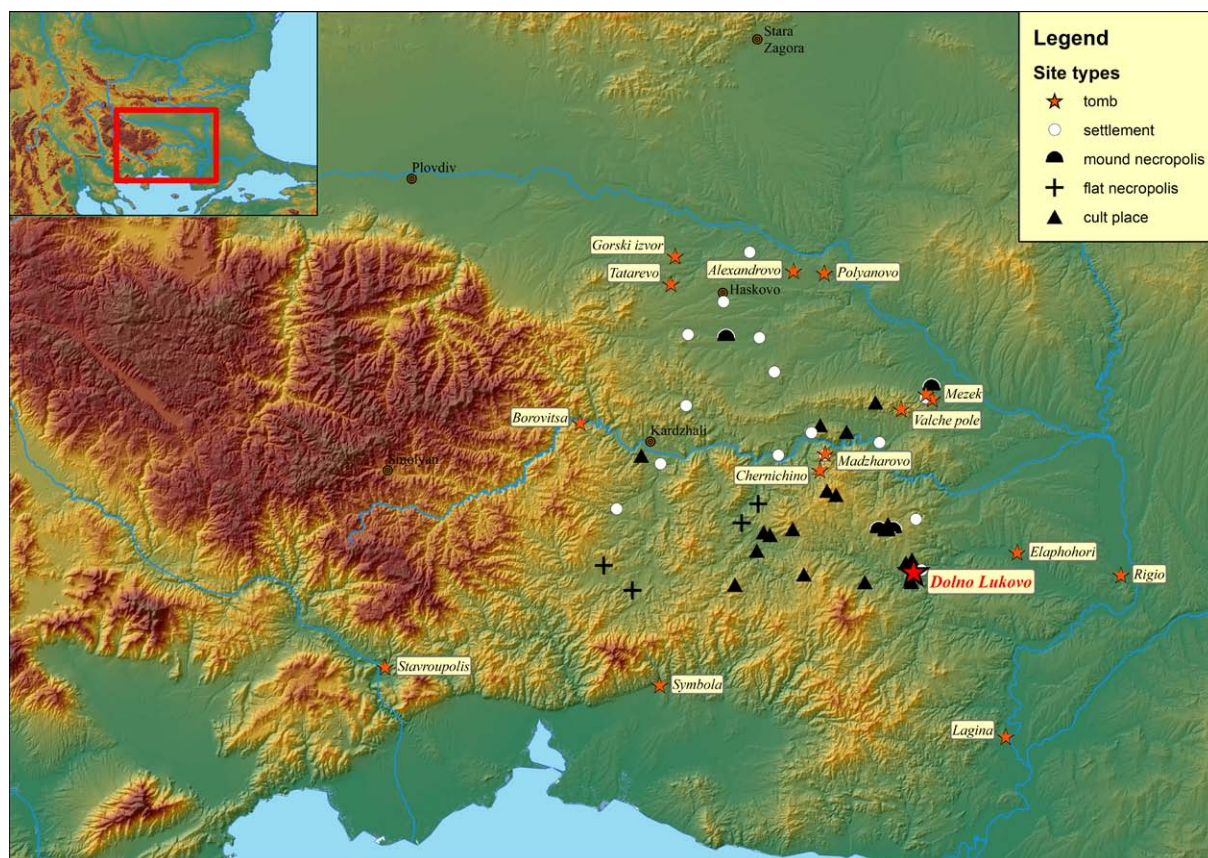
The tumulus is situated in Ronkite locality, 3.5 km to the northwest of the village of Dolno Lukovo. It was built on a low ridge in the shape of an irregular segment of a sphere. The foundation diameter is 32 m and the height is 4.30 m. The mound consists mainly of local sandy soil and the tomb is situated almost in its centre (fig. 1). A smaller tumulus (10–12 m in diameter and 0.50–0.60 m high) is situated 70 m to the east. A number of contemporary sites, such as settlements, sanctuaries and cemeteries, have been surveyed and recorded in the neighbouring areas (map 1).

History of research

The tomb was discovered as a result of looting activity in the summer of 1991. The treasure hunter's trench made on the ridge uncovered part of the tomb's roof. Consequently, the upper part of the northern wall of the tomb's chamber was destroyed, allowing the looters to enter the tomb through the opening.

1992

A small rescue excavations of the tomb, due to the insufficient funds, were carried out in the au-



Map 1. Map of the Eastern Rhodopes with the known tombs and other types of sites from the Classical and Hellenistic periods (author J. Tzvetkova)

turn of 1992. A 3m-wide trench was made in the southern periphery of the tumulus along the intended extension of its longitudinal axis. The *dromos*, the antechamber and the burial chamber were uncovered (figs 1, 4). A large number of fragments of painted wall plaster was collected (fig. 7.3–5). It can be assumed that it had covered all interior parts of the tomb. Some of the grave goods were also found, such as a silver coin of Alexander III, parts of a burial wreath, a fragmented bronze bilateral fibula, a black glazed clay lamp and pottery sherds, among which sherds from two amphorae from the islands of Thasos and Kos¹. Most of the finds were discovered in the antechamber, where several scattered human bones were also found. Part of a saddle horse body (half of its chest and one of its left forefeet) together with an iron hoop from a saddle was laid in the *dromos*, in front of the antechamber. According to Dr. L. Ninov, who studied the bones, the anatomical order of the leg bones and the ribs shows that the flesh was intact when the horse was buried. The horse was grown up, completely developed, over 4 years old, 147 cm high, i.e. it can be classified to fall into the group of the so called high horses.

After the excavations were completed, the slabs of the floor pavement and the northern wall displaced by the looters were restored to their original locations. Emergency measures for reinforcement of the building were undertaken, and the surface was covered with soil from the excavation trenches (Нехризов, Кулов 1992; Нехризов 1993; 1999, 25, фиг. 2).

1995

Since the tomb was heavily damaged by the initial looting and robbers' activity after the excavations, it was decided to excavate the tumulus and make a complete record, to remove the preserved wall

1 The amphorae fragments are consulted with Dr. Ch. Tzochiev.

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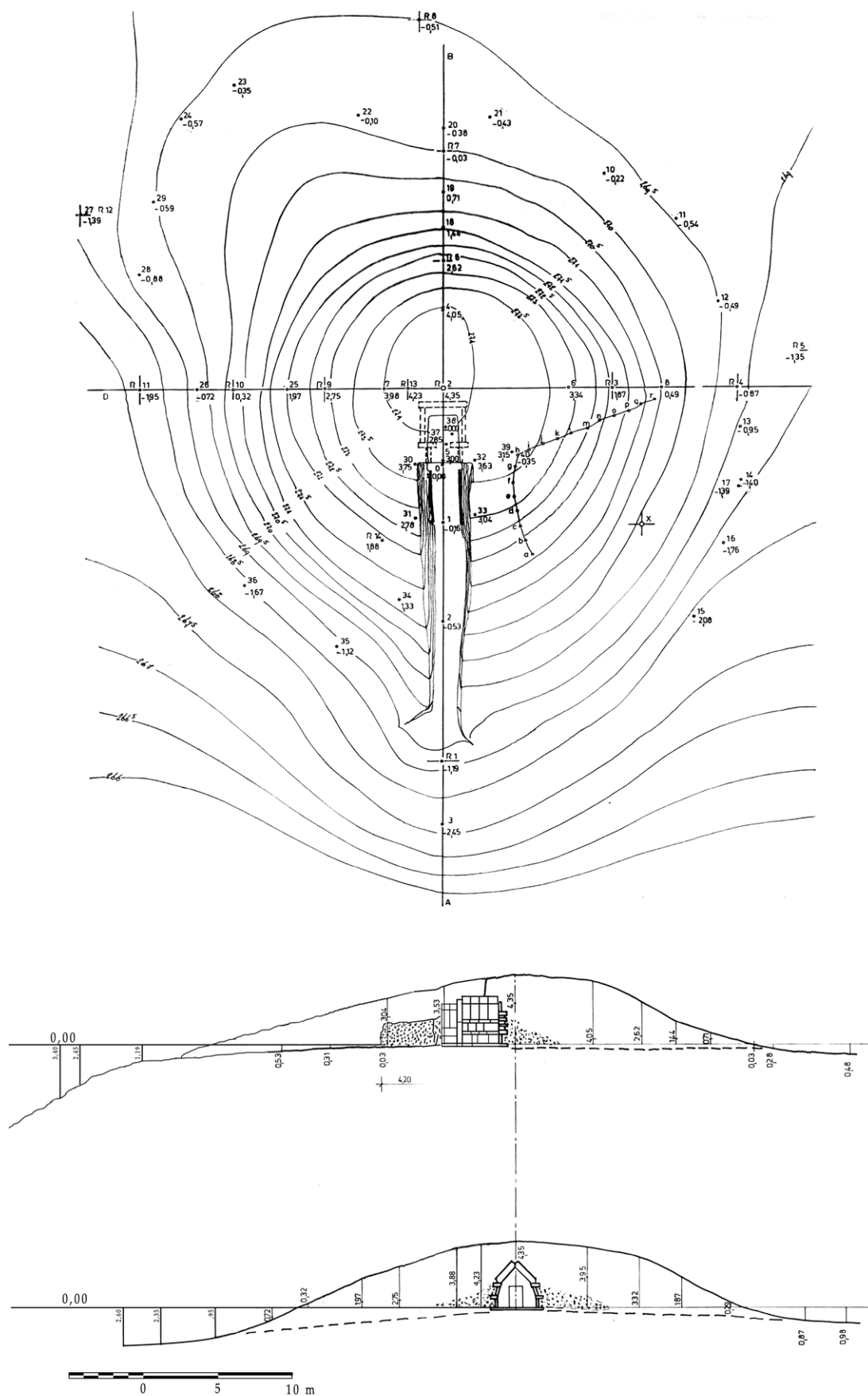


Fig. 1. Tacheometrical plan and sections of the tumulus (author architect V. Popov)

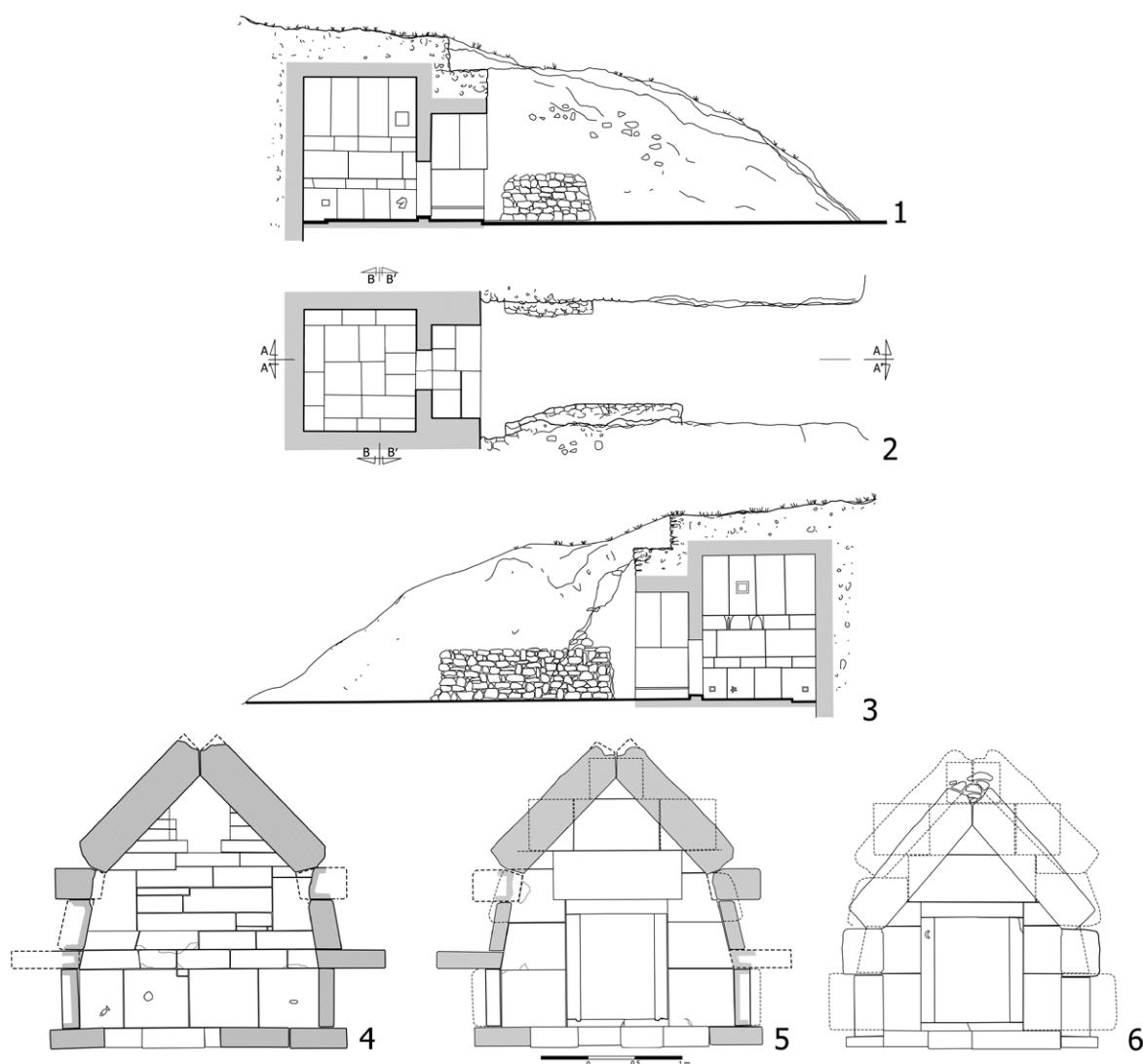


Fig. 2. Plan, sections and recording of the tomb's walls after the excavations in 1992 (author architect V. Popov)

plaster, to consolidate the construction and close the tomb and, finally, to restore the tumulus soil cover. The implementation of these activities was financially supported by the Ministry of Culture.

A trench was set on the ridge of the tumulus in order to make an architectural record. The trench revealed the top of the gabled roof of the tomb.

It was established that during a previous attempt to penetrate the chamber, the blocks on the top of the roof had been destroyed, one of the lead seals connecting the blocks had been pulled out, and another one was stretched in such way that a gap had appeared between the blocks (fig. 4.3).

The trench made in 1992 was extended to the east to reveal completely the eastern wall of the *dro-mos*, whose axis follows the axis of the chamber and the antechamber. The soil cover in the southeastern sector of the tumulus was also excavated. A layer of dark soil containing a thinner layer of small-sized roughly processed stones is visible in the cross-sections. The measurements show that the concentration of roughly processed stones is probably part of the periphery of the stone cover of the tomb. This layer has protected the walls on the outside and extends approximately to the base of the roof blocks.

The conservation activities carried out included repositioning of the architectural elements of the walls and the floor, which have been displaced but intact, replacing the missing ones, removing the preserved parts of the painted wall plaster in the antechamber, mounting a metal reinforcing construction in

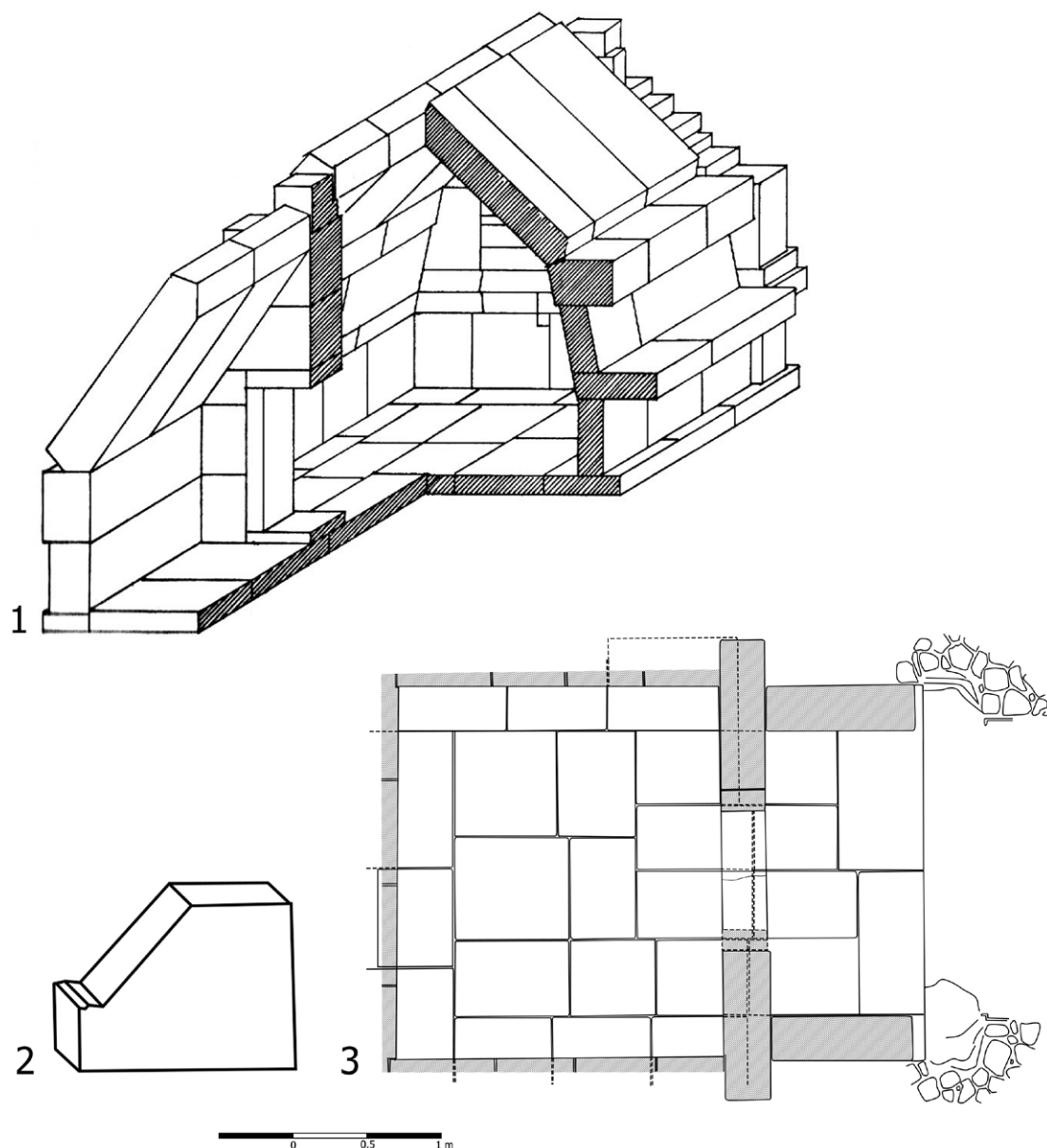


Fig. 3. 1. Axonometric section of the tomb; 2. A limestone slab, shaped as part of the gable; 3. Plan of the tomb's floor (author architect V. Popov)

the burial chamber, closing the antechamber and restoring the soil mound².

Simultaneous rescue excavations were carried out at the second smaller tumulus, which was almost completely destroyed by illegal machine digging. The excavations brought to light three cist burials of children, containing no grave goods, as well as concentrations of pottery sherds dated back to the Late Bronze Age and the Antiquity (Нехризов 1996).

Architectural design

The damages and the removal of important elements of the tomb's construction in 1992–1995

2 The architectural record and the conservation project of the tomb were prepared by architect V. Popov (National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage); the removal and preservation of the painted wall plaster was implemented by a team, headed by the restorer S. Aenski.



Fig. 4. 1–2. View from the south to the tomb's entrance after the excavations in 1992; 3. The discovered cover of the burial chamber (author G. Nekhrizov)

heavily affected its integrity and cultural value. However, these destructive activities provided an opportunity for important observations on the way it was constructed.

The tomb consists of a burial chamber, which is almost square in plan and has an entrance from the south, a south-facing antechamber and a *dromos* of an undetermined length (fig. 2). The burial chamber and the antechamber were built as follows: a floor consisting of carefully cut marble slabs of different sizes was made first (fig. 3.1, 3); and walls, which differ in construction, were rested directly on the floor.

The northern wall of the burial chamber was made entirely of marble blocks and slabs arranged in irregular courses. The two lowermost courses only correspond to those at the eastern and the western walls (figs 2.4; 5.2). The first course is made from vertically-arranged marble slabs whose thickness does not exceed 0.15 m. The second course is made from similar slabs arranged horizontally, so that their face is aligned with the slabs from the first course, while substantial part protrudes outwards. The face of the second course of the eastern and western walls is slightly sloping. The third course of these walls consists of significantly longer and slightly thicker (0.26 m) blocks made from soft limestone. The faces of these blocks keep the bevel angle from the second row. The fourth course consists of narrower but thicker limestone blocks. They are severely damaged because they carry the weight of the roof blocks (figs 2.1, 3; 5.3–4).

The southern wall separates the chamber from the antechamber. The entrance was made in this wall which must have determined the different way of its construction. Like the northern wall, this wall was built in such way that some of the side blocks protrude beyond the burial chamber. Only its first course corresponds to the orthostatic order of the rest of the stones but it is made from thicker marble slabs. The next two courses were made from limestone blocks. The entrance was shaped by three marble slabs 0.15 m thick, and the lower threshold is made from a thinner slab with grooves providing the grip with the uprights. There is a large limestone block resting above the upper threshold. It was laid in specially shaped sockets cut in the *quadrae* of the third course located on both sides. These *quadrae* are in a lower position compared to the block above the entrance and for that reason their level was corrected with two narrower stones. The fourth course consists of three blocks, cut from the side in such a way as to take the weight of the first pair of roof blocks. In turn, they are overlaid by a specially shaped cube-like block which also has a link to the roof blocks (figs 2.5; 5.1).

The burial chamber has a gabled roof consisting of four pairs of massive limestone blocks (ap-

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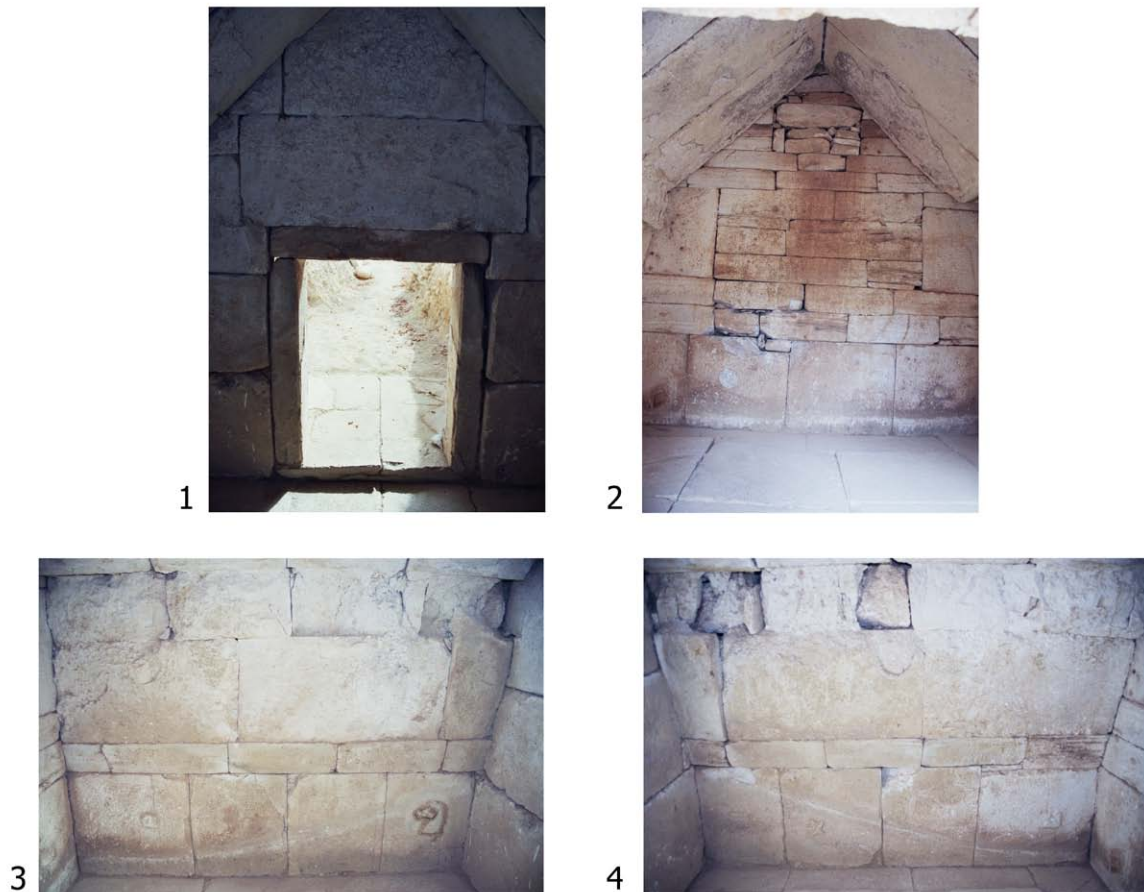


Fig. 5. The burial chamber interior: 1. Southern wall; 2. Northern wall; 3. Eastern wall; 4. Western wall (author G. Nekhrizov)

proximately $1.60 \times 0.55 \times 0.43$ m large). Both the lower and upper edges of the short sides of the roof blocks are cut in order to provide a wider contact surface with the blocks underneath and above. The stability of the construction is strengthened by lead seals connecting the upper parts of the roof blocks (figs 2.4, 5; 4.3).

The antechamber is narrower and lower compared to the burial chamber. Its walls are made from pairs of limestone blocks whose front part is rusticated. The roof construction is different from that of the burial chamber but consists of two pairs of blocks (figs 2.6; 4.2).

A limestone slab, shaped as a part of a gable, was found in the antechamber in front of the chamber entrance (fig. 3/2). A few more marble architectural elements, whose original location in the tomb could not be determined, were also found. One of them is especially interesting. It is a cube, ending as a horn-shaped cone (fig. 4/1). Unfortunately, the second time the tomb was robbed it was stolen together with the slab with a horse head image and the western entrance slab with a crescent representation. The second noteworthy element is a block with trapezoidal cross-section.

The *dromos* is built of local roughly processed stones bound by mud, and its walls are slanting outwards probably to reinforce the tumulus (fig. 2.1–3). The preserved parts are ca. 4.5 m long and ca. 1 m high, and they stretch to the east and the west in front of the antechamber. It was not possible to specify the entire length of the *dromos*, but the test trench revealed a large amount of large quarry rocks and plaster fragments (probably remains of the walls which had collapsed inward) in the area between the tumulus's periphery and the survived parts. This allows to suggest that the *dromos* has provided access from the periphery of the tumulus to the antechamber.



1



2



3

Fig. 6. Relief figures on the first row of marble slabs of the burial chamber: 1. Five-pointed star; 2. Horse head; 3. Crescent moon on the western side of the entrance (author G. Nekhrizov)

There is a certain distance between the antechamber and the walls of the *dromos*. It was occupied by a structure, which did not survive. This is evidenced by the mortar plaster on both side-walls of the antechamber, which extends to the south outside the outlines of the front blocks and there are recess-like cracks in the plaster of the *dromos* (figs 3.3; 7.2). It can be suggested that there was a certain construction with a representative façade between the antechamber and the *dromos*. Such assumption is also supported by the slab with an oblique side. If this slab was part of a façade, it might have looked like the façade of Gonimasedze's tomb discovered at the town of Smyadovo (Атанасов, Неделчев 2002, 553, план 4). There is also another possibility, if there was a second slab mirroring the first one and a third triangular-shaped slab on top of them, they would have formed a gable above the entrance of the façade.

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Fig. 7. Part of the painted mortar plaster: 1. In the antechamber; 2. In the dromos; 3–5. Fragments (author S. Aenski)

However, these reconstructions are only hypothetical.

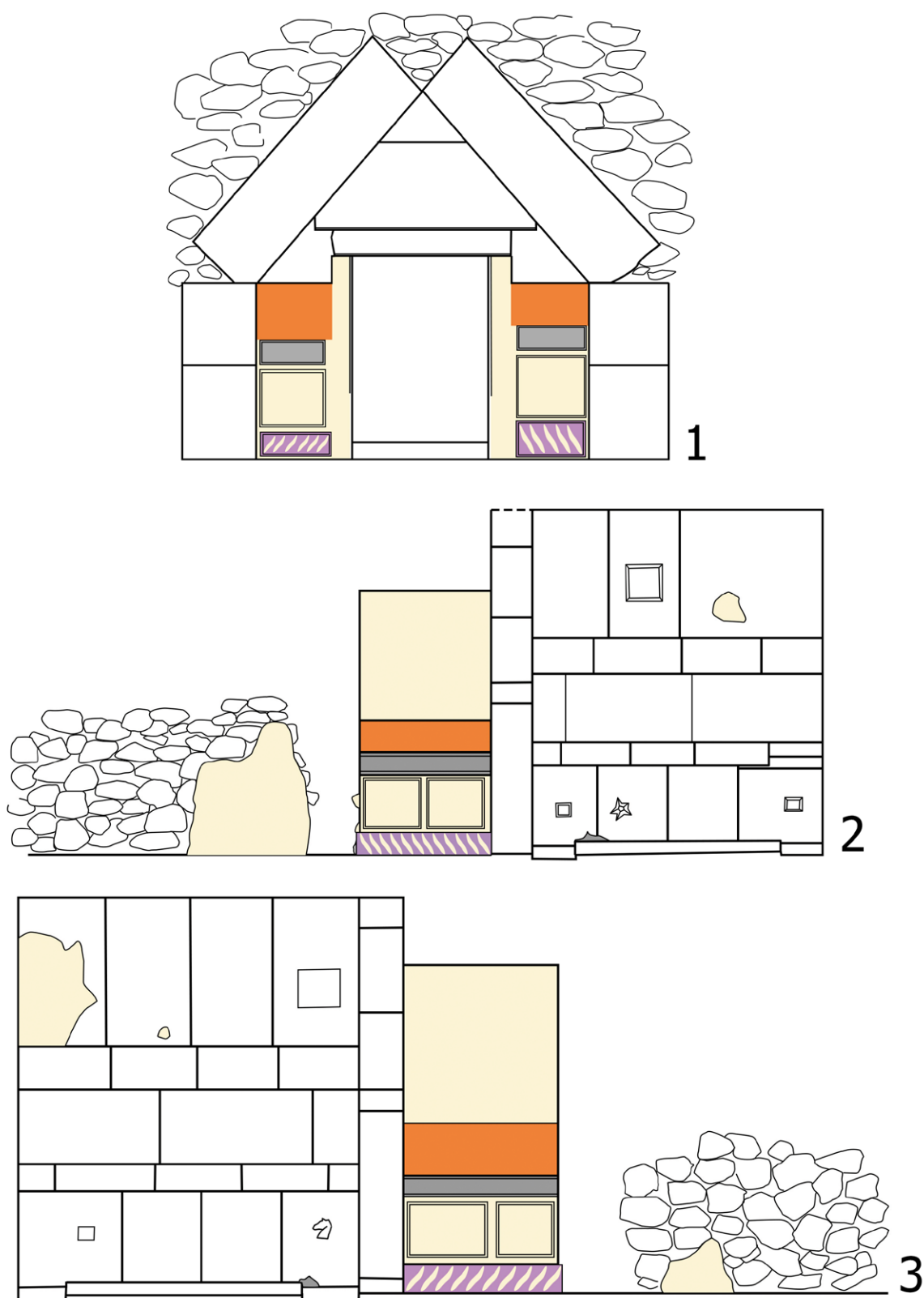
The analysis of the rocks used for the construction of the tomb proves their local origin. The limestone is white, friable and soft with a bioclastic structure. Similar Oligocene limestones have been found to the southeast of the village of Malko Gradishte and along the Armira River valley near the town of Ivaylovgrad. The marble has thin layers and the closest sources of such material are near the village of Pelevun and the village of Kamilski dol³.

The use of marble as main building material can be regarded a specific feature of the Dolno Lukovo tomb. This seems natural, considering that marbles are common rocks in the Ivaylovgrad region. It is indicative that even a regular funerary structure in this area can be made from marble slabs although roughly shaped (Нехризов, Миков 2001, 62). Certain marble architectural details (the door frames) have also been observed in the most closely situated contemporary tomb at Symbola in Northern Greece (Πενταζος, Τριανταφυλλος 1976b).

Decoration

The plastic decoration is on the orthostatic first course of marble slabs of the burial chamber. Geometric images in relief are represented on 8 of the 14 slabs: disc, squares, rectangles, five-pointed star as well as two realistic images of a horse head and fish (fig. 6.1–2). Plastic squares are made on two of the roof blocks as well. Outside, a crescent moon is cut on the top part of the western pillar of the door frame (fig. 6.3). It is very important to emphasise that the images cut on the marble slabs were coated with mortar plaster and were not visible during the second period of the tomb use. It seems unlikely,

³ Mineralogical and petrographic analyses of plaster and rocks were conducted by a team of the Mineralogy and Petrography Department (Sofia University of Mining and Geology) headed by Assoc. Prof. A. Sultanov.



*Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the painted decoration in the antechamber based on the fragments found in situ
(author S. Aenski)*

although possible to some degree, that the marble slabs with reliefs have been re-used.

All interior parts of the tomb at Dolno Lukovo were coated with mortar plaster, a small part of which was intact⁴. Several of the preserved fragments allow to specify that the slabs of the *crepidoma* were coated with pink plaster. The same plaster covered even the floor of the *dromos*, where it was laid directly on the trampled soil. The floor plaster was laid last which is proven by its fragments laid over the first grey painted band of the wall of the burial chamber. Since the mortar plaster in the burial chamber is not preserved *in situ*, it is difficult to reconstruct the order of the painted bands. It is established with certainty that above the floor there was a grey band (plinth) with unknown width (fig. 8.2–3). Similar grey band was running in the upper part of the chamber walls, separating the painted walls from the roof blocks, which were plastered with white mortar. The walls were probably decorated with coffered bands painted in deep red, violet, white and grey, but their sequence cannot be specified.

In contrast to the burial chamber, there are pieces of intact plaster on the walls of the antechamber (which was filled with soil). This allows reconstruction of the sequence of the painted bands, which is the same on all three walls, but for their width. Above the floor, there is a pale violet plinth with oblique light stripes protruding slightly forward (Нехризов и др. 2017, 97). The field above the plinth presents an imitation of square orthostates of white colour, separated by wide joints. It is worth noting that what in effect is imitation of stone masonry covers the rusticated blocks of the wall but it does not match their order. A narrow dark grey band, protruding slightly forward, precedes a field painted in ochre. The coating is plastered white mortar, similar to the one in the burial chamber. The slabs on both sides of the entrance are also coated with white-coloured mortar. It is important to emphasise that the mortar plaster on the walls of the antechamber was laid over a clay layer that was meant to even the walls. This method is found in other Thracian tombs as well, for instance the Muglitzh tomb (Гергов 1988, 19–21).

Despite the rough masonry of the *dromos*, its walls were also plastered. The face of the wall made from quarry rocks was aligned with clay plaster which was coated with white mortar (figs 7.2; 8.2–3).

The technique used is a wet fresco. The bands or the panels were marked by a pointed tool on the wet plaster (fig. 7.3). The plasters are two and three-layered, and the last but one (sometimes the last) layer was painted. Chemical analyses showed that no organic binders were used. The solidity of the plaster is a result of the property of lime to carbonise from the carbon dioxide in the air (Tarassova et al. 2020).

The analysis of the preserved parts of the mural painting of the tomb at Dolno Lukovo suggests that, in terms of interior decoration, it is rendered in the plastic structural style (Вълева 1985; Чичикова 1997).

Date

The tomb can be dated to after the mid-3rd c. BC based on the discovered artefacts and the burial rite. Since it seems possible that the tomb has had two periods of use, it can be suggested that it was built slightly earlier but not before the beginning of the 3rd c. BC.

Conclusion

The tomb at Dolno Lukovo can be classified, according to Architect M. Russeva's typology, as a single-chamber, with quadrangular plan of the central chamber and additional rooms, and pitched roof (Рыцева 2000, 51). The presence of an antechamber and a *dromos*, possibly separated by a façade, con-

4 The observations of the restorer St. Aenski were of great value for the reconstruction of the tomb painted decoration.

stitutes special features. According to the typology of the Thracian tombs suggested by J. Valeva, the tomb at Dolno Lukovo should be determined as one with rectangular burial chamber, an antechamber open at the front, with double pitched roof and ritual space (code IA(2.1)C(2.1)-E) (Вълева 2013, 34).

The construction technique can be defined as a pseudo-isodomic two-course orthostatic (Стоянова 2002, 84–90). The destruction of the burial chamber provided opportunities for new observations and measurements, which lead to the accumulation of important additional information about the techniques used for its construction. It became evident that the lowermost course of the northern, eastern and western wall of the burial chamber was not built with blocks but with marble slabs. Logically, the following question arises: why the foundations of the two side walls, which carry the weight of the roof and the soil cover above, were made from vertically laid thin slabs? The most reasonable explanation is that the stone and soil fabric of the tumulus were made at the same time as the walls in order to strengthen them from the outside. Thus, the part of the horizontally laid slabs of the second course extending outwards rested on a solid layer of stones and clay, providing a stable foundation for the blocks of the upper courses. It is also possible that the tomb was constructed by removing part of the already accumulated tumulus (Китов 2003, 34). However, this assumption is not supported by the evidence. If this line of thinking about the construction of the burial chamber are correct, it has to be assumed that the *dromos* was built during the first stage of the tomb use in order to provide access to the entrance through the soil cover. Although this does not seem very likely, it is possible that the *dromos* was not covered at that time. Most probably, it was covered after the walls, and the floor had been plastered in order to protect them from snow and rain. However, the excavations did not reveal traces of stone cover or remains of a wooden one. If the chamber remained uncovered for a period after the walls and the floor had been plastered, it was most likely not long. Most probably, shortly after the walls were painted, a funeral was conducted, the tomb was sealed, and the *dromos* was covered. It is possible that the *dromos* was added during the second period of the tomb's use, and a certain amount of soil was added to the cover of the tumulus.

The gabled roof of the tomb from Dolno Lukovo was constructed in a special way and has no direct parallels among the Thracian tombs known so far. The closest parallel in this respect is provided by the structure under tumulus no. 4 of the cemetery in Manyov Dol, near the village of Starosel. Its cover consisted of five pairs of stone blocks connected by special grooves. However, in this particular case, the small size of the burial chamber allowed the use of smaller blocks, and the angle between the two sides of the roof was much wider (Кисъов 2001, 24, фиг. 23–26). The tomb near Smyadovo also has a gabled roof, but it consists of four pairs of limestone slabs (Атанасов, Неделчев 2002, 553, план 4). Other funeral structures also exist, which roofs consist of eaves-arranged large slabs or blocks, but their construction is rather different (Велков 1927, 172, фиг. 2; 1928/1929, фиг. 46; Πενταζος, Τριανταφυλλος 1976a, 315, πιν. 255; 1976b, 314, πιν. 253; Китов 1996, 35; 2003, 37; Паунов 2002; Стоянова 2002, 119–121; Нехризов, Цветкова 2017).

An important feature of the tomb is the plastic decoration, which finds no parallels in terms of selection, arrangement and location of the relief images carved on the marble slabs. It is difficult to assess what the aesthetic effect was of these small relief images located near the floor of the burial chamber. It seems logical to seek the connection between this composition consisting of signs and symbols and the burial ritual. Perhaps, they were located so close to the floor to match the level at which the dead body was laid in the tomb. The plastic decoration, the precisely followed pattern of the blocks and their carefully treated surface including the rusticated faces of the blocks in the antechamber indicate a carefully designed plan for the details of the interior decoration. From the present-day point of view, it is difficult to answer the question about the reason for plastering the walls in a later period.

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