

A HELLENISTIC TOMB FROM THE PONTIC REGION: THE İKİZTEPE TUMULUS

PONTOS BÖLGESİNDEN HELLENİSTİK BİR MEZAR: İKİZTEPE TÜMÜLÜSÜ

Makale Bilgisi | Article Info

Başvuru: 08 Aralık 2025 | Received: December 08, 2025
 Hakem Değerlendirmesi: 11 Aralık 2025 | Peer Review: December 11, 2025
 Kabul: 19 Aralık 2025 | Accepted: December 19, 2025

DOI : 10.22520/tubaar.1796076

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Abstract

İkiztepe, an important archaeological site near Bafra in Samsun, provides evidence of an unbroken sequence of habitation spanning from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age. Excavations that began in the 1970s revealed that the region was part of the Pontic cultural sphere. The İkiztepe tumulus, unearthed during the 1975–1976 excavations, consists of an east–west oriented structure with a dromos and two barrel-vaulted burial chambers. Constructed of cut limestone blocks, the architecture of the tumulus reflects the funerary traditions of the Hellenistic period. Ceramic fragments and a gold stater bearing the name of Lysimachus, discovered within the burial chamber, date the monument to the 3rd century BCE. In terms of layout and construction technique, the İkiztepe tumulus shows similarities to the Kavak-Tepecik, Baruthane, and Lerdüge tumuli in and around Samsun. These architectural characteristics demonstrate that during the Hellenistic period, Pontos was in cultural interaction with the regions of Paphlagonia and Macedonia. The arrangement of the dromos, antechamber, and barrel-vaulted main chamber reflects the influence of Macedonian tomb architecture, while the construction of the monument on a high hill also incorporates symbolic elements of the Thracian tumulus tradition.

Keywords: İkiztepe, Hellenistic, Pontos, Tumulus

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Bu makalenin atıf künüyesi / How to cite this article: Turak, Ö. (2025). A Hellenistic tomb from the pontic region: The İkiztepe Tumulus. *TÜBA-AR*, 37, 75-84. <https://doi.org/10.22520/tubaar.1796076>



Özet

İkiztepe, Samsun'un Bafra ilçesi yakınlarında yer alan ve Erken Tunç Çağından Orta Tunç Çağı'na kadar kesintisiz yerleşim gösteren önemli bir arkeolojik merkezdir. 1970'lerde başlayan kazılar, bölgenin Pontos kültür alanı içinde yer aldığı göstermiştir. 1975–1976 kazalarında açığa çıkarılan İkiztepe tümülü, doğubatı doğrultulu, dromoslu ve tonozlu iki mezardan oluşan bir yapıdır. Kesme kireçtaşı bloklarla inşa edilen tümülüsün mimarisi, Hellenistik dönemin mezar geleneğini yansıtır. Mezar odasında ele geçen keramik parçaları ve Lysimakhos adına basılmış altın stater, yapının MÖ 3. yüzyıla tarihlenmesini sağlar. İkiztepe tümülü, plan düzeni ve yapı tekniği bakımından Samsun ve çevresindeki Kavak-Tepecik, Baruthane ve Lerdüğe tümülüsleriyle benzerlik göstermektedir. Bu mimari özellikler, Hellenistik dönemde Pontos'un Paphlagonia ve Makedonya bölgeleriyle kültürel etkileşim içinde olduğunu kanıtlar. Dromos, ön oda ve tonoz örtülü ana oda düzeni, Makedon mezardan mimarisinin etkisini yansıtırken; yapının yüksek bir tepeye inşa edilmesi, Thrak kökenli tümülüs geleneğinin sembolik unsurlarını da barındırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkiztepe, Hellenistik, Pontos, Tumulus

Ikiztepe, a significant archaeological site in the Pontic region, is situated 55 km from Samsun and 7 km northwest of Bafra on a natural elevation formed by four distinct mounds. Covering an area of approximately 66 decares (375 x 175 meters), the İkiztepe settlement lies at an average altitude of 20 meters above sea level. Positioned at the northernmost edge of the Bafra Plain, this settlement stands out as a strategic center due to its advantageous location, suitable for both land and sea transportation (Alkım, 1975, pp. 5-12; 23-30; Atasoy et al. 2024, p. 123).

İkiztepe entered the focus of academic inquiry following surface surveys undertaken in 1940 and 1941, marking its emergence as a site of archaeological significance. Approximately three decades after its initial identification, the site re-emerged as a focus of scholarly interest through more extensive and methodologically rigorous investigations. In 1972–1973, a team under the direction of B. Alkım conducted systematic archaeological surveys in and around İkiztepe. The ceramic assemblage recovered and analyzed during these investigations demonstrated a continuous occupation sequence spanning from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age. In light of this evidence, İkiztepe was designated as a site of high archaeological significance and selected for systematic excavation. Excavations at İkiztepe, initiated in 1974 under the direction of B. Alkım on behalf of the Turkish Historical Society, continued under his leadership until 1981. Following Alkım's death, the directorship of the excavations was assumed by Ö. Bilgi, under whose supervision the work proceeded until his retirement in 2012 (Beyazıt et al., 2024, p.123). Following a brief hiatus, archaeological work was resumed in 2021 under the direction of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan Beyazıt, a faculty member of the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Letters, İstanbul University.¹

Tumuli are artificial mounds of earth or stone constructed over burial chambers built in varying architectural traditions, depending on their period and cultural characteristics. These structures served as the graves of ruling elites—such as kings, queens, or members of the nobility. It is known that tumuli were introduced to Anatolia by the Phrygians, a tribe believed to have originated from Thrace. Likewise, the origin of this burial type is believed to trace back to Thrace. First appearing in Central Anatolia in the 8th century BCE, tumuli spread to Western Anatolia with the Lydians in the 7th century BCE, and later became one of the prominent grave types across various regions of Anatolia during the periods of Persian rule and the Hellenistic era (Avşar, 2016; Öztekin, 2006). The tumulus tomb located at the İkiztepe settlement, situated within the Pontic sphere of influence, represents one such example.

In antiquity, Pontos was not a clearly defined region until the rule of the Mithridatic dynasty (281–63 BCE). It is generally accepted that Pontos was bounded by Colchis to the east, the Halys River to the west, the Pontos Euxenios to the north, and Cappadocia and Armenia to the south (Şenyurt & Akçay, 2016, p. 224). Due to its location, İkiztepe falls within the sphere of influence of the Pontos region. However, no evidence of a Hellenistic settlement has been identified at İkiztepe to date.

Compared to other regions, the classical periods of Pontos have been relatively under-researched. Nevertheless, existing studies indicate that the dominant burial type in the region's funerary traditions was rock-cut tombs (Fleischer, 2009; Kumandaş, 2004; Jackson, 2012; Özdemir, 2001; Tekin, 2020). However, within the present-day boundaries of Samsun Province (Alkım, 1975; Temür & Yiğitpaşa, 2020 a-b), which falls within the Pontic sphere of influence, numerous tumuli are found. Among these, the Kavak-Tepcik tumulus in the Kavak district (Yiğitpaşa & Temür, 2021, pp. 451-466), the Baruthane tumuli in the İlkadım district (Atasoy et al. 2005, pp. 153-165), the Dondortepe tumulus in Canik (Ünan, 2009, p. 1-28), and the Lerdüğe tumulus in Havza (Akok, 1948, pp. 835-853) are the most notable examples.

The Tumulus of İkiztepe

The tumulus, which was brought to light during the 1975 excavations and fully excavated in the 1976 season, was constructed on the eastern slope of Tepe I, in an east–west orientation, by cutting into the Neo-Hittite layer (Alkım et al., 1988, p. 85). The tomb, with its entrance located on the eastern side, consists of

¹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan Yurtseven Beyazıt, the director of the İkiztepe excavation, for granting permission to study and publish the İkiztepe tumulus. I also extend my thanks to the deputy excavation directors, Burçin Afşar and Burhan Gülkhan, for their invaluable assistance and support.

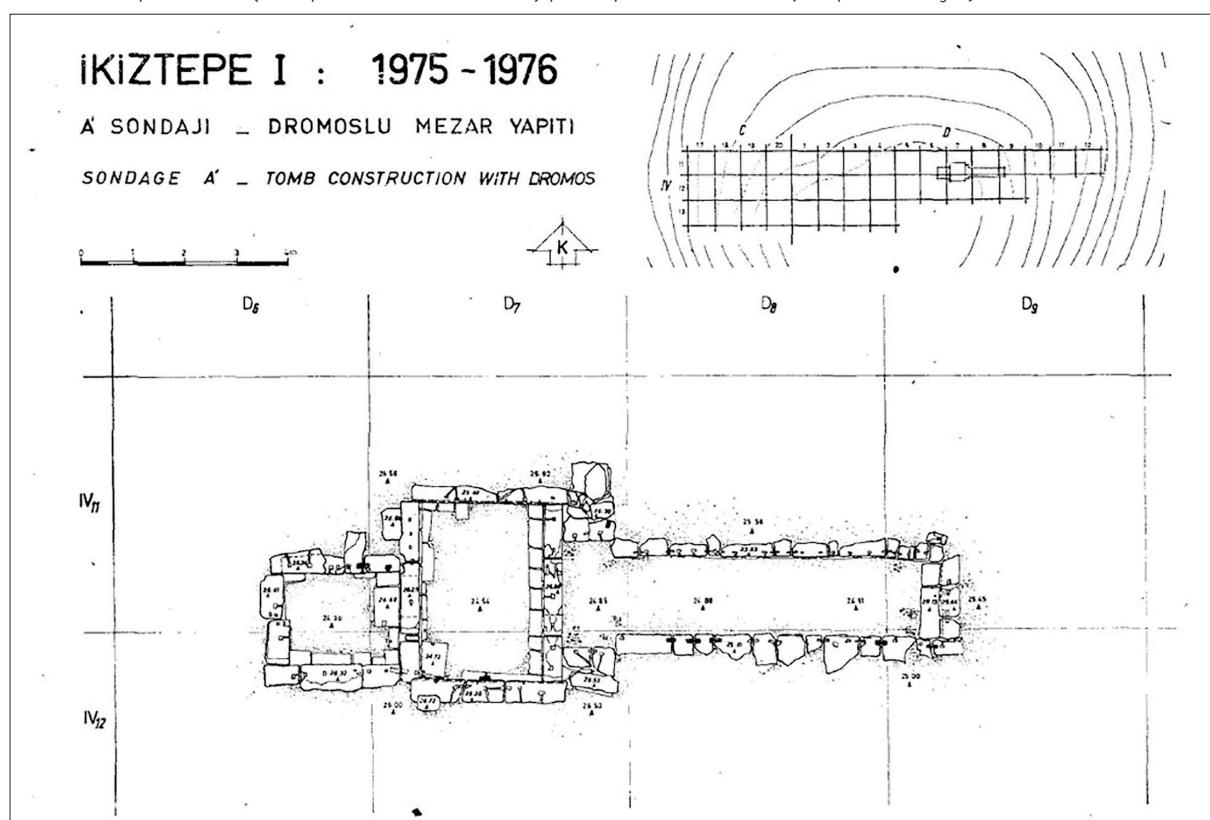
a dromos and two barrel-vaulted chambers (Fig. 1). Archaeological evidence indicates that the tumulus was constructed using cut limestone blocks. The dimensions of these blocks are 65–80 cm in height, 30–108 cm in width, and 20–35 cm in thickness. These blocks were joined together using lead clamps.

Dromos

Constructed from ashlar blocks, the dromos measures 7.90–1.55 meters and is accessed from the east via two steps. Its floor consists of compacted earth, with small stones occasionally used. Although the roof has not been preserved, the shape of the wall stones suggests that the dromos originally had a flat roof. Approximately 6.15 meters from the entrance, the dromos widens to the north and south, forming a rectangular area measuring 1.05–2.04 meters (Fig. 2–3).

Figure 1

Plan of İkiztepe Tumuli (Ikiztepe Excavation Archive) / İkiztepe Tümülüsü Plan (Ikitepe Kazı Arşivi)



Antechamber and Main Chamber

The antechamber, accessed through a doorway at the western end of the dromos, has a rectangular plan and measures 2.38–3.40 meters. The north wall of the chamber is preserved to a height of 2.22 meters, the south wall to 2.24 meters, and the west wall to 1.77 meters. The floor of the chamber is paved with neatly cut ashlar blocks. Aligned with the entrance axis of the antechamber, a doorway in the west wall leads to the main chamber. This chamber, also rectangular in plan, measures 1.71–2.30 meters. The north wall is preserved to height to 1.85 meters, the west wall to 2.02 meters, and the east wall up to 1.81 meters. Like the antechamber, the floor is paved with well-cut ashlar blocks (Fig. 3).

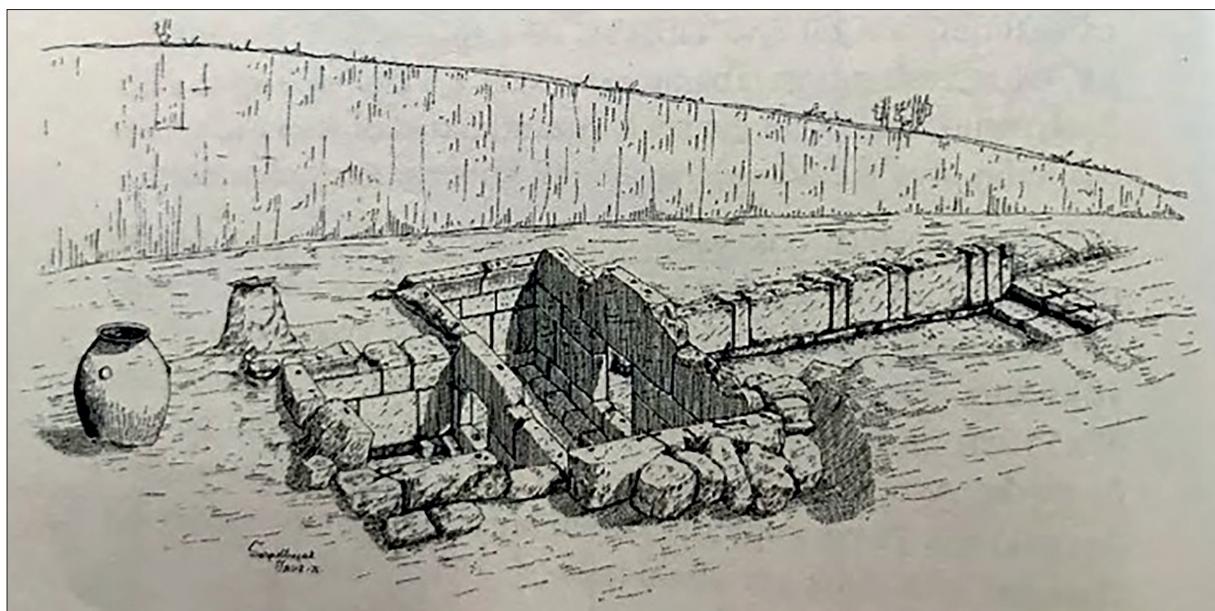
The total length of the structure, including the dromos and both burial chambers, is 13.50 meters. Due to extensive destruction of the tumulus, it is not possible to determine the original form of its superstructure or its diameter.

Figure 2

Dromos and the General Structure of the İkiztepe Tumulus (İkiztepe Excavation Archive) / İkiztepe Tümülü. Dromos ve Tümülüün Genel Görünümü (İkiztepe Kazı Arşivi)

**Figure 3**

General Construction of İkiztepe Tumulus (İkiztepe Excavation Archive-Illustration by Celal Tuna) / İkiztepe Tümülüü Genel Görünüm (İkiztepe Kazısı Arşivi-Çizim: Celal Tuna)



Burial Practices and Finds

The İkiztepe tumulus had been looted and heavily damaged. As a result, there is no available evidence regarding burial practices. However, during the removal of accumulated soil and stone blocks from the vault and walls within the burial chambers, fragments of Hellenistic period ceramics and parts believed to belong to a terracotta sarcophagus were recovered (Alkım et al., 2003, pp. 5, pl.XIV, fig. 7). Among the limited

number of fragments, two have been identified as rim pieces belonging to deep bowls. Below the lips of these two fragments, decorations created using a triangular stamping technique are arranged side by side. Another fragment exhibits two parallel grooves beneath the lip curve, with additional grooves extending downward to form the decoration. On a different fragment, a decoration is formed between the rim and the body by parallel oblique lines changing direction (Fig. 4).

The coin discovered in the İkiztepe tumulus is a gold stater with a diameter of 2 cm and a weight of 8.5 grams (Fig. 5). Its obverse features a portrait of Alexander the Great, while the reverse depicts Athena seated on a throne. Athena rests her left arm on a shield and holds the goddess of victory, Nike, in her right hand. This coin was minted in the name of Lysimachus, who assumed the title “basileus” (king) in 306 BCE. Coins issued during Lysimachus’ lifetime, who died in 281 BCE, bear the inscription “BASILEΩΣ ΛΥΣΙΜΑΧΟΥ.” However, such coins continued to be minted after his death, particularly for commercial purposes (Baydur, 1988, p. 119).

Although the exact minting location of the coin is not known, it is understood that Lysimachus’ dominion encompassed northern Bithynia, southwestern regions, Mysia, Troas, Aiolis, Ionia, part of Caria, Lydia, and Western Phrygia. Coins were minted in various cities across this extensive territory. On the other hand, Byzantium maintained its independence during Lysimachus’ lifetime, and therefore, no coins of this type were minted there in his name while he was alive. This situation indicates that the example in question is posthumous, meaning it was minted after Lysimachus’ death.

The coin, dating from 281 BCE to the mid-3rd century BCE, bears the AN monogram. It is believed to belong to the city of Ankhiale, a settlement affiliated with Apollonia located west of the Black Sea, which is known to have minted its own coins during the Roman period. It is also known that this city did not issue coins in its own name prior to the Roman era. Furthermore, Ankhiale is assumed to have been in close political and commercial association with Byzantium, an important center during this period (Baydur, 1988, p. 120).

Figure 4

Ceramic and Terracotta Sarcophagus Fragments Dated to the Hellenistic Period Found in the Tumulus (İkiztepe Excavation Archive) / Tümülü Kazısında Bulunan, Hellenistik Döneme Tarihlenen Pişmiş Toprak Keramik ve Lahit Parçaları (İkiztepe Kazı Arşivi)

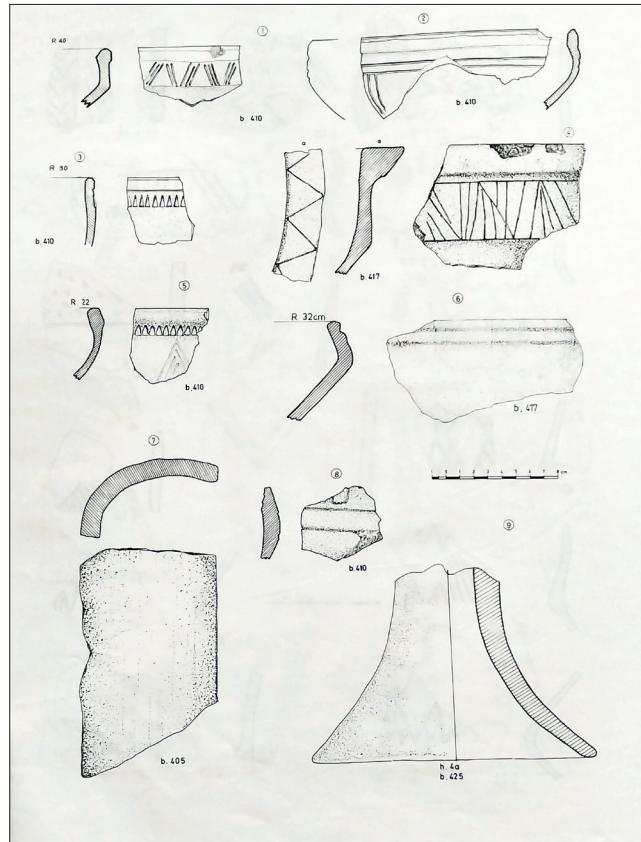


Figure 5

Gold Stater from İkiztepe Tumulus (İkiztepe Excavation Archive) / İkiztepe Tümülü Kazısında Ele Geçen Altın Stater (İkiztepe Kazı Arşivi)



Assessment and Conclusion

Reflecting the broader regional tumulus tradition, the İkiztepe tumulus is strategically positioned on elevated ground, commanding a view over its surroundings. Comprising a dromos, a front chamber, and a main chamber covered by a barrel vault, the tumulus is similar to several other tumuli with subterranean tombs found in the Samsun region. Its closest parallel is the Kavak Tepecik tumulus. The tumulus, dated to the 2nd century BCE by researchers (Yiğitpaşa & Temür, 2021, p. 456), consists of a dromos with a flat roof, and a front and rear chamber covered by barrel vaults. Architecturally, it differs from İkiztepe by having an additional offering chamber (Yiğitpaşa & Temür, 2021, pp. 453-455). Although the Baruthane tumuli, dated to the Hellenistic period, exhibit a different architectural structure, their cut stone masonry and barrel-vaulted chambers (Atasoy et al., 2005, p. 156) allow for comparison with the İkiztepe tumulus. Another similar example is the tumulus No. 4 located in the village of Lerdüğe in the Havza district. The Lerdüğe tumulus exhibits an architectural plan consisting of a dromos and a single chamber. Cut stone blocks were used in the construction of both the dromos and the chamber, which are traditionally covered with a barrel vault (Akok, 1948, p. 839 ff.). The Lerdüğe tumulus is dated to the Hellenistic period (1st century BC) and extends into the Roman period (up to the 2nd century AD) (Akok, 1948, p. 852). The tumulus with a dromos and burial chamber identified during surface surveys in the Vezirköprü district is considered to be Hellenistic due to the use of cut stone in its construction (Temür & Yiğitpaşa, 2020b, p. 2875). Numerous tumuli have been identified within the district (Temür & Yiğitpaşa, 2020a, p. 628 ff.; 2020b, p. 2874). Another example of Pontic tumuli is the Sivritepe tumulus located east of Samsun in Giresun (Kaymakçı, 2014, p. 1-8). The tumulus, constructed with ashlar blocks and vaulting techniques and compared to İkiztepe, is also dated to the Hellenistic period.

It is important to consider that the İkiztepe tumulus is not merely a local burial within Pontos, but should be evaluated within the context of its connections to surrounding regions. In this regard, the possibility of cultural interaction with the neighboring region of Paphlagonia to the west warrants attention.

Studies conducted in Paphlagonia have revealed the presence of various types of tumuli belonging to different periods (Yıldırım, 2021, p. 107 ff.). Across the region, it has been determined that the burial chambers of the tumuli generally feature a rectangular plan and are covered with barrel vaults (Yıldırım, 2021, p. 121). The burial chambers generally have a rectangular plan and are covered with barrel vaults. These rectangular tomb structures are typically characterized by a dromos, an antechamber, and a burial chamber. Such tumulus burial chambers are covered with various types of roofing, among which the barrel vault is the most common. The tumuli of Paphlagonia (such as the Kastamonu Kaypı tumulus, Tonoz Tepe tumulus, Karabük Mezarlık Tepe, and Topçu Mezarlığı tumuli) reflect the funerary architecture of the Hellenistic period with their architectural plans and cut stone masonry (Yıldırım, 2021, p. 128).

The use of barrel vaulting in the burial chamber architecture of the İkiztepe tumulus suggests that this tradition should also be traced westward from Paphlagonia. Indeed, the tumulus burial architecture of Paphlagonia similarly indicates this continuity (Yıldırım, 2001, p. 127). Paphlagonia and Bithynia, the western neighbors of Pontos, are among the regions where the tumulus tradition is predominant. In these areas, many tumuli, mostly constructed from the 4th century BCE onward, exhibit architectural features including a dromos and a burial chamber (with square or rectangular plans) covered by a barrel vault roofing system.²

The barrel vault system constructed with ashlar stones, used in tumulus substructure architecture in Anatolia, is believed to have first appeared in Macedonia from the third quarter of the 4th century BCE onward.³ Moreover, Macedonian tumulus burial structures are often characterized by a decorative façade architecture, typically constructed at the entrance to the main burial chamber (Borza, 1987, p. 107). While barrel vault roofing systems are commonly used in tumuli featuring a dromos, some spaces other than the main chamber also exhibit flat roofing solutions (Borza, 1987, p. 108).

2 Bora (2015, s. 124–295; 323 ff.) discusses several tumuli including Kocaeli Üçtepeler I, II, VII, Güvercinlik, Kanlıbağ, Turgut Mahallesi, Zonguldak Çeştepe, Mendeller, Bursa Dörttepler I, Osmangazi, Sakarya Akyazı I, Tersiye, and Bolu Dodurga. Some of these tumuli were constructed in the 2nd century BCE.

3 Bora (2015, s. 102-103, notes 73 and 75) suggests that the origin of the barrel vault may trace back to Anatolia and the Near East, and that this architectural form could have been adopted through technical personnel in Alexander the Great's armies or by groups previously in contact with these regions.

Tumuli, which possess a deeply rooted tradition, are generally regarded as elite or aristocratic burials (Fedak, 1990, p. 56 ff.). This interpretation does not rely on a single criterion but rather on multiple lines of evidence that support one another. Their construction required substantial labor, cost, and organization, which in turn indicates considerable economic power and social status. Moreover, the deliberate placement of most tumuli in locations visible from a distance (such as dominant hilltops) constitutes another indicator of elite status. The architecture of sub-tumulus burials—characterized by stone-built burial chambers, dromoi, and vaulted structures, in contrast to the simple graves used by the general population—as well as the associated grave goods, demonstrates the high status of the interred individual. References in ancient sources to kings, nobles, and heroes being buried in tumuli, together with the fact that some tumuli were visited over long periods and transformed into cult centers, represent important evidence reinforcing the association of tumuli with elite and heroized individuals (Schnapp-Gourbeillon, 2016, p. 205 ff.).

The İkiztepe tumulus reflects a large part of these facts. As is frequently observed in Thracian tumuli (Delemen, 2004, p. 16; Delemen, 2016), its location on a hill dominating the plain, along with the meticulous workmanship of the burial chamber, indicates that the grave belonged to an aristocrat.

Another important issue is the process of cultural interaction. In Thrace, which was in contact with Macedonia, the primary burial type preferred for aristocratic interments is the chamber tomb, the great majority of which are covered by tumuli (Palagia, 2024, p. 154). However, certain differences in sub-tumulus architecture between the two regions indicate that this relationship represents a degree of cultural interaction rather than a direct, one-to-one continuation of the same tradition. In fact, the same situation applies to the Bithynians, who are said to have been a Thracian tribe (Güney, 2014). This interaction can be traced through tumuli extending via Bithynia to Paphlagonia and, more specifically, to Pontos. The İkiztepe tumulus constitutes one of these examples. Nevertheless, due to the disturbed condition of the tomb, it is not possible to provide more detailed information or to determine whether the burial exhibits certain local characteristics—in other words, whether it represents a hybrid structure.

In conclusion, the spatial arrangement of the İkiztepe Tumulus, featuring a dromos plan with an antechamber and a rear chamber, supports its dating to the Hellenistic period; this assessment is further corroborated by the discovery of coin finds. The plan schema and architectural features indicate that the tomb can be considered within the context of Macedonian funerary traditions. Additionally, construction of the tumulus on a high, commanding hill demonstrates the incorporation of strategic and symbolic elements characteristic of Thracian tradition in its site selection.

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