

НАЦІОНАЛЬНА АКАДЕМІЯ НАУК УКРАЇНИ • ІНСТИТУТ АРХЕОЛОГІЇ НАН УКРАЇНИ



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ЗМІСТ

CONTENTS



Статті

РУДИЧ Т. О., КОЗАК О. Д. Населення південно-західної Волині кінця доби бронзи за антропологічними матеріалами з могильника Рованці
VERTIENKO H. V. Scythian *σάγυρις*: Word — Image — Archaeological Object

Articles

- 5 RUDYCH T. O., KOZAK O. D. Late Bronze Age Population of South-Western Volyn Based on Anthropological Material From Rovantsi Necropolis
23 ВЕРТІЄНКО Г. В. Скіфський *σάγυρις*: слово — образ — археологічний об'єкт



Публікації археологічних матеріалів

ZABAVIN V. O., NEBRAT S. H. Barrows near Kalynivka village (Based on Materials of the Mariupol Archaeological Expedition)
КОМАР О. В., БІЛИНСЬКА Л. І., БУГАЙ О. М. Середньовічний скарб срібних злитків зі знахідки поблизу с. Дернове на Сумщині

Publications of Archaeological Materials

- 47 ЗАБАВІН В. О., НЕБРАТ С. Г. Кургани біля с. Калинівка (за матеріалами Маріупольської археологічної експедиції)
80 КОМАР О. В., БІЛИНСКА Л. І., БУНАЙ О. М. A Medieval Hoard of Silver Ingots Discovered near Dernove village in Sumy Oblast



Охорона археологічних пам'яток

TELIZHENKO S. A. Monitoring Archaeological Heritage in the Conditions of War: Damage and Military Use of the Mounds Near Vesela Hora Village in Luhansk Oblast

Protection of Archaeological Monuments

- 110 ТЕЛІЖЕНКО С. А. Моніторинг археологічної спадщини в умовах війни: пошкодження та використання у воєнних цілях курганної групи біля с. Весела Гора Луганської обл.



Методи археологічних досліджень

РАДЧЕНКО С. Б., ЧЕНЦОВ Я. М.
Фотограмметрія у структурі трансдис-
циплінарної археології: приклад моделювання
артефактів із середньовічного степу України

Methodology of Archaeological Research

121 RADCHENKO S.B., CHENTSOV Ya. M. Photo-
grammetry in the Structure of Transdisciplinary
Archaeology: an Example of Modelling Artefacts
from the Medieval Steppe of Ukraine

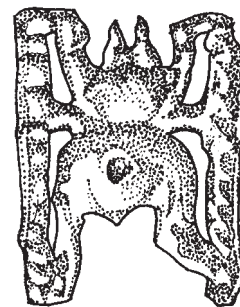


Хроніка

Євгенія Федорівна Редіна: життя, присвячене
археології

News Review

149 Yevheniia Fedorivna Redina: a Life Dedicated to
Archaeology



MONITORING ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN THE CONDITIONS OF WAR: DAMAGE AND MILITARY USE OF THE MOUNDS NEAR VESELA HORA VILLAGE IN LUHANSK OBLAST

To date, there is no exact number of objects of archaeological heritage that have suffered as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The publication provides information about a barrow group damaged by the Russian occupiers which is located near Vesela Hora village in Luhansk Oblast.

Key words: Luhansk Oblast, barrow group, archaeology of war, archaeological monitoring

Russian aggression has caused and continues to cause irreparable damage to Ukraine with a very long list of crimes: total destruction of settlements, killing and deportation of the civilian population, torture of prisoners of war, persecution on ethnic and religious grounds, destruction of natural resources, objects and sabotage against technological objects of civil infrastructure, which lead to ecological and other disasters. Separate clauses should be considered crimes against the cultural property of Ukraine, which also include crimes related to the destruction or partial destruction of archaeological heritage objects, use of objects of archaeological heritage for military purposes, theft of archaeological valuables from the destroyed objects of archaeological heritage or museums and their movement for the purpose of resale or creation of own collections in Russia, conducting illegal excavations in the occupied territories, etc.

Russia has begun seizing Ukrainian territory since 2014, when, with the help of separate units of the Russian army, it started occupying govern-

mental buildings and military units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula (The UN... 2014; 2020). Later, in order to legitimise its actions in the eyes of the international community, on March 16, 2014, Russia resorted to holding an illegal referendum on the status of the Crimea. Around the same time, Russia began preparations for the seizure of the south-eastern regions of Ukraine. As a result of a series of military events in 2014–2015, during which brutal combat clashes took place, accompanied by heavy losses among the military and civilian population, parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions were occupied. During the military operations of 2014 and 2015, as well as in subsequent years, cases of damage to the integrity of cultural property were repeatedly recorded (Damage... 2024). In one of the publications, I proposed a typology of the nature of damage to objects of archaeological heritage (Telizhenko 2016; Теліженко 2023, p. 25). In the future, this typology is likely to undergo changes, but currently it has the following form:

1. Damage to the integrity of objects of archaeological heritage (mounds, settlements, burial grounds, etc.) as a result of shelling (presence of craters from explosions);

2. Objects of archaeological heritage, which are damaged as a result of the arrangement of military objects (defensive structures/observation points or firing points with the use of equipment or hand tools) and their subsequent use for military purposes;

3. Mined areas of archaeological heritage sites;

4. Areas with objects of archaeological heritage, which are used for large-scale construction of military infrastructure. The construction of civil infrastructure in the occupied territories is an issue for a separate study.

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In all cases, the degree of damage is determined directly on the spot, and this requires the development of a separate calculation method.

One of the examples of the use of an archaeological heritage site for military purposes is a barrow group near Vesela Hora village in the Luhansk Oblast. This paper is the first in a series of publications dedicated to the damaged archaeological heritage of the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts of the eastern part of Ukraine.

Methods

To prepare this publication, the methods of studying cartographic materials, as well as the analysis of satellite images available online, were used. The best resource for studying satellite images is *Google Earth* and the feature that allows users to view areas of the Earth's surface in images from previous years. To work with other objects of archaeological heritage, the following resources were also used: *HereWeGo*, *Sentinel hub*, as well as *Maps and Satellite imagery* by Brady Africk.

The methods of remote monitoring of the condition of archaeological heritage have been applied for a long time and are among successful examples. For instance, the work of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) under the Science and Human Rights program, which investigated information on the destruction of Armenian cultural properties by Azerbaijan between 1998 and 2005 (American... 2010). Using high-resolution satellite images, AAAS documented the gradual destruction of a medieval Armenian cemetery of the 15th — 16th centuries in the Julfa region (Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan).

A large-scale remote sensing project using a complex of data: aerial photographs, historical maps, documentary and archaeological records, and satellite images, was conducted in North-East Africa (Laguna-Palma, Toscano; Rodríguez-Rellán 2024).

Examples of remote monitoring of archaeological heritage in wartime using high-resolution satellite images include the joint work of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) and the US Department of State investigating damaged archaeological sites in Syria, Northern Iraq, and Southern Turkey, which resulted in approximately 5,000 documented cases (Casana, Laugier 2017).

In 2019, an article was published that was dedicated to establishing the fact of the destruction of part of the Old City of Palmyra (the Temple of Bel,

the Temple of Baal Shamin, the Arch of Triumph, etc.) by ISIS between 2015 and 2017 and assessing the damage caused (Cerra, Plank, Schreie 2019). Due to the joint work of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) and the German Aerospace Center (DLR), the facts of the destruction of the monument, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, were established, and a damage map was created.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, independent centres have been activated to study the impact of war on the condition of archaeological heritage sites, which, among other things, use remote monitoring using satellite images in their work (see: Буйських et al. 2023; Чабай та ін. 2024; Koropetsky et al. 2024).

In the study, in order to establish the status of objects of archaeological heritage, there is a need to check the register documentation of cultural heritage protection departments or study archival materials stored in the Scientific Archives of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (the IA NAS of Ukraine).

The Location of the Mound Group

The mound group consists of four mounds and is located 1873 m south-east from the Church of the Annunciation (1776–1777), which is in the centre of Vesela Hora village in the Luhansk urban community, Luhansk district, Luhansk Oblast, and 4.8 km south-east from the central part of the city of Shchastia (Novoaidar Region), and 14.4 km to the north-west from the central part of the city of Luhansk (the building of the regional state administration) (fig. 1–3). Topographically, the mound group is located on a relatively viable section of the right bank of the Siverskyi Donets River, on the watershed that separates the Rivers Siverskyi Donets and Luhan. At a distance of 24 to 30 m to the east from the barrow 1 of the mound group, there is a road of local importance connecting the city of Luhansk with Vesela Hora village, and 720 m to the east is the highway N-21 (Starobilsk-Donetsk). The mound group has a no. 1390 on the state register. The GPS coordinates of the barrow 1 are the following: *N 48.69954622790683, E 39.267818808598165*.

Historical Reference

Mounds are earthen embankments of various sizes that were built over burials. As a rule, mounds are not located on watersheds, but they are



Fig. 1. Location of the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on the Physical map of Ukraine (marked with a red rectangle)



Fig. 2. Mound group (state registration no. 1309) on the image from November 11, 2017 (marked with a yellow circle). Source: Google Earth



Fig. 3. Mound group (state registration no. 1309) on the image from October 7, 2004. Source: Google Earth

also known on low floodplain terraces. The oldest burial mounds in Luhansk Oblast should be considered to be the Early Eneolithic burial barrows (Рассмакін, Черних 2017). Over time, representatives of other, later cultures buried their dead in these structures. Given the significant number of scientific publications, the study area mostly presents burials from the Bronze Age as well as burials from the Early Iron Age and the Middle Ages.

For the first time, the mound group near Vesela Hora village was recorded on the military top-

ographical map of the Russian Empire of 1846–1863, which was created under the leadership of F. F. Schubert and P. O. Tuchkov (Карти Шуберта...; Карти триверстовки...). The map shows one large embankment and seven smaller embankments (fig. 4). On the neighbouring site, which is located to the north-east, and which will be discussed below, two mounds are also marked one large and a small one next to it. The distance between both barrow groups can be between 400 to 600 m.

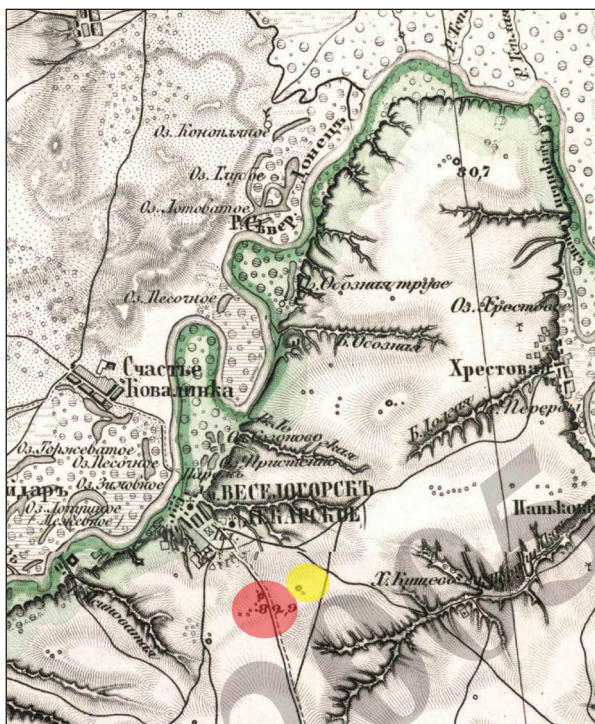


Fig. 4. Location of the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on the map of F. F. Schubert (1863). Red circle — barrow group no. 1309; yellow circle — barrows on the neighbourhood

In the Scientific Archives of the IA NAS of Ukraine, there is a register card compiled on August 18, 1947 by T. Lytvyn (Мельник, Батинов, Литвин 1947). It contains data on four mounds that extended to the south-west of the Luhansk-Vesela Hora highway (fig. 5). The nearest and largest barrow 1 was located closer to the highway. The card contains the following information (fig. 6):

“Mound 1. An earthen embankment of 3 m high. Diameter — 30 m. The surface of the mound is overgrown with wild grass and covered with defensive trenches;

Mound 2. An earthen mound 1.7 m high. Diameter — 15 m. The foot is ploughed. The top is overgrown with wild herbs;

Mound 3. An earthen mound 1.3 m high. Diameter — 12 m. The foot is ploughed. The entire surface, with the exception of the top, is ploughed;

Mound 4. An earthen embankment 1 m high. Diameter — 9 m. The entire surface is ploughed.”¹

Thus, as of 1947, one of the mounds was damaged, because it was used for military purposes during the World War II. Other embankments were destroyed.

¹ Hereinafter translated from Russian by S. A. Telizhenko.

УРСР
КОМІТЕТ
з ОХОРОНИ КУЛЬТУРНО-ОСВІТНІХ
ГОТАРІЙ
при Раді Міністрів УРСР

Форма № 1 6

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Інституту археології
Респ. АН УРСР 3000

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Область *Воронішівська*

район *Александрівський*

місто *на 5-й кілометрі західної дороги
Весела Гора – Воронішівград*

Начато _____ 194_ г.

Закінчено _____ 194_ г.

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Fig. 5. Photocopy of the registration card in form no. 6, signed by T. Lytvyn. A group of barrows on the 5th kilometer of the western Vesela Hora-Voroshilovhrad Road. 1947. Scientific Archives of the IA NAS of Ukraine

In 1977, the mound group was re-examined by a researcher of the Siversk-Donetsk Archaeological Expedition, O. F. Horelik (Паспорт курганної групи 1977). However, in his documentation only the two largest mounds (mounds I and II) are indicated with the following dimensions: *“Mound I. Diameter 47 m, height 2.6 m. The slopes of the mound are steep; Mound II. Diameter 35 m, height 3 m. The slopes of the mound are very steep. The surface is damaged by excavation of soil from a war-time dugout [WWII-auth.]”*. In the register of archaeological monuments of local significance of Luhansk Oblast, it is stated that the object’s documentation was created in 1985, and on June 27, 1985, by the decision no. 297 it was adopted to registration (registration no. 1390). The photograph in the document shows two mounds (fig. 7). Unfortunately, there is no information about which mound is in the foreground. The topographic plan made by D. Rudykov is also interesting (fig. 8). The description of the mound in the passport does not correspond to the image on the map, because the pass-

1. Найменування пам'ятника	Група курганів
2. Охоронний № за реєстром (на місці не заповнюється)	
3. Умовні позначення (на місці не заповнюється)	
4. Точне визначення місцезнаходження пам'ятника (адреса)	На 5 ^й кілометрі західної дороги Весела Гора – Ворошиловград
5. Схематичний план, обміри, рисунок або фотографія пам'ятника.	
6. Опис зовнішнього вигляду пам'ятника (будівля, поле битви, курган, замок, фортеця і т. інш.)	

Fig. 6. Photocopy of the registration card in the form no. 6, signed by T. Lytvyn. A group of barrows on the 5th kilometer of the western Vesela Hora–Voroshyllovhrad Road. 1947. Scientific Archives of the IA NAS of Ukraine



Fig. 7. View of the mounds I and II of the mound group no. 1309. Passport of the mound group no. 1309 (1977)

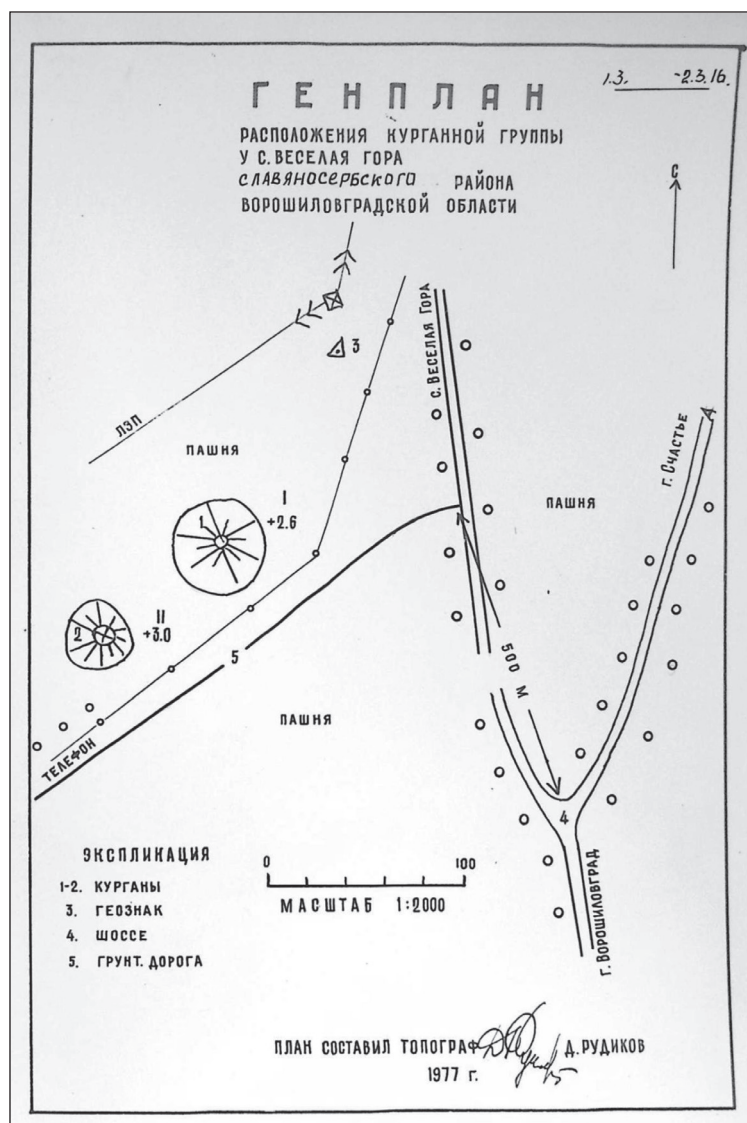


Fig. 8. Plan of the mound group no. 1309. Passport of the mound group no. 1309 (1977)

port indicates that the mound II was located 78 m to the north-northeast, and according to the map it turns out that the mound I is located in this direction in relation to the mound II. The overlay of a modern satellite image shows that either the map is quite conditional, or the area has undergone minor transformations.

Events of 2014–2022

Until 2014, the barrow group was relatively quiet, except for the fact that the burial mound of the barrow 2 was regularly undermined. During the time that has passed since 1947, a power line was built near the mound group, and already closer to the 1990s, a reclamation basin was built 553 m south-west from the barrow 1, from which canals

were set aside to the south-east and directly next to the highway, closer to the barrow group.

In 2014, a new post-WWII history of the mound group begins. If “defensive trenches” were recorded on the mound I in 1947, then the two mounds have been damaged since 2014. In June 2014, the Ukrainian military blocked 11 km of the H-21 highway in order to control traffic and monitor the town of Shchastia, which is located on the lower left bank of the Siverskyi Donets River (fig. 9). They set up a checkpoint located 724 m to the east of the mound group. On the field itself, which is located between highways H-21 and Luhansk–Vesela Hora, firing positions and trenches were entrenched. Since July 2014, the number of firing positions has increased significantly, and a busy dirt road has appeared near the mound 1, which is located next to the

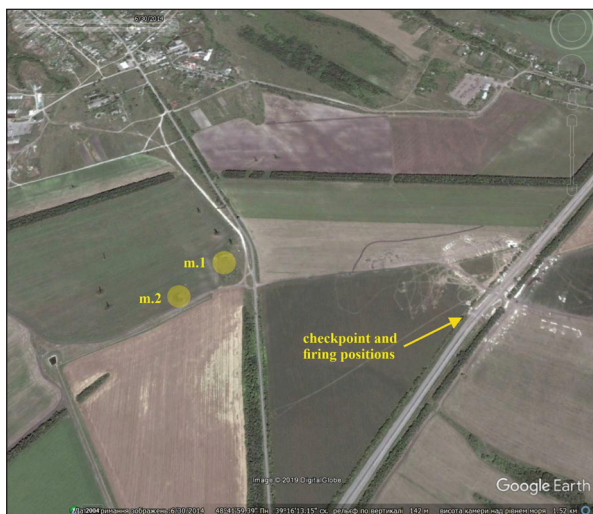


Fig. 9. Image of an intact mound group from June 30, 2014. 720 m to the east from them, near the H-21 highway, a checkpoint and firing positions are set up. Source: *Google Earth*

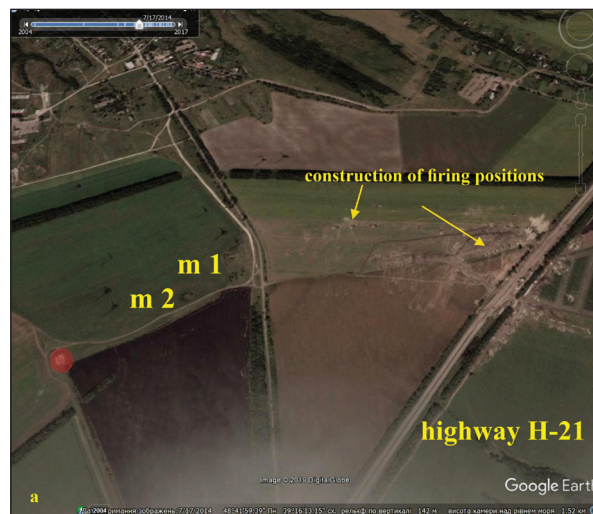


Fig. 10. Situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on July 17, 2014. Source: *Google Earth*

Luhansk–Vesela Hora highway (fig. 10). Between July and August 2014, the Ukrainian military were pushed back to the Siverskyi Donetsk River and this part of the route became controlled by the Russia supported military. In August 2014, defensive structures (foxholes) and firing positions began to be installed on both mounds (fig. 11). Due to the fact that the area occupied by the Russia controlled military came under fire from the Armed Forces of Ukraine (from the left bank of the Siverskyi Donetsk River), the occupants had to move 720 m in the western direction — directly to the mounds. There are no images between August 2014 and October 2014, so it can be assumed that the trenches between the mounds I and II were dug exactly during this period (within one month) (fig. 12). The south-western part of the trench wedged into the body of the mound II, while its eastern and north-eastern parts wedged into and surrounded the body of the mound I. In April 2015, the situation was almost without change — the mounds and the field on which they were located came under fire from the left bank (fig. 13). At the same time, the latter was shelled from the side of the barrows and the adjacent area, which was prepared for this purpose in 2014. A rectangular platform was excavated from the western side of the mound II, which may have been used to accommodate a vehicle. The image from August 1, 2016 shows that there were almost no changes in the mound group, but already a year later it can be seen that the trench was extended in the western direction — it acquired clearer configurations, in accordance with the requirements for the arrangement of field fortification

(fig. 14). On the image from August 4, 2017, the trenches were actively used for their intended purpose (fig. 15). The greatest activity was observed near the mound I — there, most likely, closer to the checkpoint, was not only a foxhole, but also a kind of command post. It is possible that some kind of shelter was made in the body of the mound II as well — the images from June 16, 2019 showed activity around this barrow and on its top (fig. 16). It could also be seen that an additional incision was made into its body from the south-western side of the mound II in 2019. It is significant that simultaneously with the activity directly on the mounds, Russia supported military had also used the landing site, which was located 309 m south-west from the mound II, since 2017. This is especially well visible on the image from January 2020. As of January 2, 2020, there was an activity around both barrows (traces from passing vehicles) (fig. 17). The image from June 2, 2020 showed that the trench was extended from the cut on the mound II in the south-west direction (fig. 18).

According to the image from the beginning of October 2021, it is possible to ascertain the absence of any activity near the mound II — the absence of traces and weed-covered trenches and the actual embankment of the mound (fig. 19). Traces of activity could be observed only around the mound I. There was no activity at all in the landing area south-west of the mound II; the path from the barrow was overgrown, and no signs of the movement of equipment were visible. This may indicate that the need for exactly these positions gradually



Fig. 11. Situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on August 8, 2014. Source: *Google Earth*

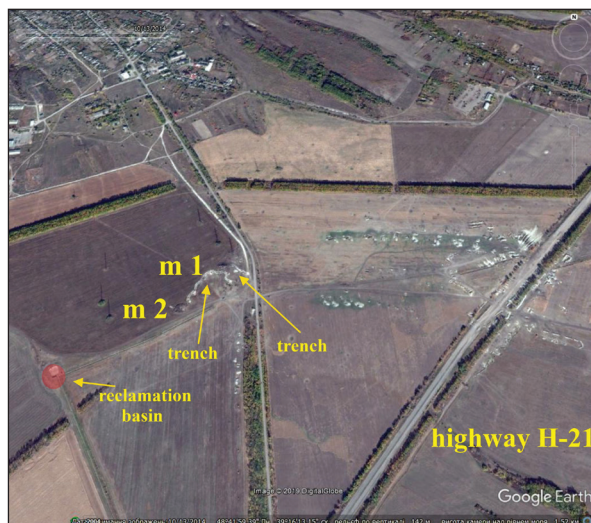


Fig. 12. Situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on October 13, 2014. Source: *Google Earth*



Fig. 13. Situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on April 10, 2015. Source: *Google Earth*



Fig. 14. Situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on August 1, 2016. Source: *Google Earth*

disappeared, as preparations for a full-scale invasion were in full swing. As of June 2022, the activity on the mounds was minimal (fig. 20).

Conclusion

The mound group was damaged for the first time during the World War II. Unfortunately, the compiler of the record card in 1947 did not make graphic images of the mounds in the plan and did not put them on schemes of “defensive trenches” of the World War II, so that the nature of the damage was clear. Between 1947 and 1977, when the mound group was surveyed for the second time, O. F. Horelik, who later wrote the documentation of the object, did not record the two embankments,

which in 1947 were 1.0 and 1.3 m high. It is possible that the survey was carried out in the summer, when the topography of the area was poorly traced, due to the presence of agricultural crops, or it can be assumed that the mounds were ploughed at that time. Between 2014 and 2020, the mounds I and II were significantly damaged as a result of the installation of defensive structures and firing points by Russia supported military. It is possible that burials were destroyed by them during the construction of engineering and technical structures. It is also possible that the defensive structures were the burial mounds 3 and 4, which were eventually destroyed. It should also be mentioned that in the area where in 2014 Ukrainian military first set up a check-point and firing positions, there were also two bar-



Fig. 15. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on August 4, 2017. Source: *Google Earth*



Fig. 16. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on June 16, 2019. Source: *Google Earth*

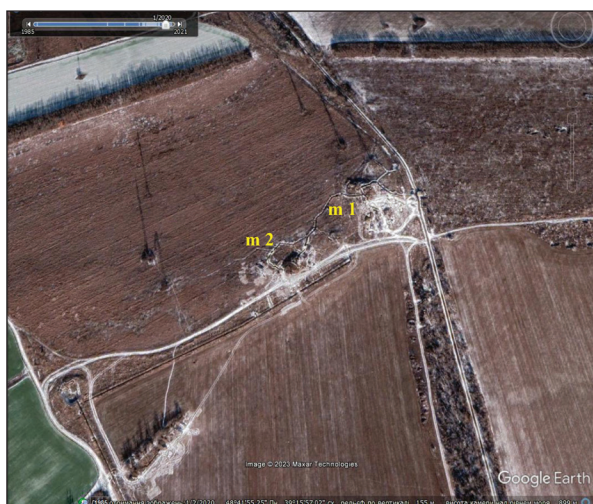


Fig. 17. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on January 2, 2020. Source: *Google Earth*



Fig. 18. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on July 4, 2020. Source: *Google Earth*



Fig. 19. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on October 2021. Sources: *Google Earth & HereWeGo*



Fig. 20. The situation at the mound group (state registration no. 1309) on June 2022. Sources: *Google Earth & HereWeGo*

rows (according to the map of the second half of the 19th century). It is possible that as of 2014 they were almost levelled, and during military activity they could have been destroyed entirely.

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МОНІТОРИНГ АРХЕОЛОГІЧНОЇ СПАДЩИНИ В УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ: ПОШКОДЖЕННЯ ТА ВИКОРИСТАННЯ У ВОЄННИХ ЦІЛЯХ КУРГАННОЇ ГРУПИ БІЛЯ С. ВЕСЕЛА ГОРА ЛУГАНСЬКОЇ ОБЛ.

Курганна група (охоронний номер 1390) розташовується у 1,8 км на південний схід від центральної частини с. Весела Гора (Луганська обл.). Уперше інформація про курганну групу з'являється на військових топографічних мапах Російської імперії 1846–1863 рр., які були створені під керівництвом Ф. Ф. Шуберта та П. О. Тучкова. На мапі того часу зображено сім насипів. У 1947 р. на курганну групу було складено облікову документацію про курганну групу на південний схід від автошляху Весела Гора-Ворошиловград (Луганськ). Вона містить інформацію про чотири насипи. У 1977 р. курганну групу оглянув співробітник Луганського обласного краєзнавчого музею О. Ф. Горелік. Він зафіксував лише два кургани. Паспорт об'єкту археології був створений у 1985 р.

Починаючи з середини серпня 2014 і до червня 2020 р. проросійські бойовики використовували курганну групу у воєнних цілях, про що свідчать супутникові знімки за вказаний період. Таким чином, не виключається, що військова активність в охоронній зоні курганної групи могла призвести до пошкодження їх насипів, а також до руйнації поховальних об'єктів.

К л ю ч о в і с л о в а: Східна Україна, Луганська обл., курганна група, археологія війни, археологічний моніторинг.

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