

# *The 'elite plot' in the cemetery of Klin-Yar (Russia)*

The emergence of a hereditary elite in the Early Alanic  
North Caucasus?

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In 1994–1996, an international Anglo-Russian expedition excavated parts of the well-known and regionally important cemetery of Klin-Yar in the Russian North Caucasus. The key aim of the project was the exploration of the relationship between culture change and population change in this multi-period burial site. While we did not lose sight of this aim, a potentially more important result of the expedition was the discovery and excavation of the 'elite plot', a concentration of the richest graves excavated hitherto at Klin-Yar. This paper intends to set out the context, the main findings, and some of the implications of this discovery.

## *The site*

The site of Klin-Yar is located in the chalk and sandstone hills of the northern Caucasus, just west of Kislovodsk in the region (*kraj*) of Stavropol. A narrow, steep-sided sandstone rock (called Paravos) is at the centre of the site, and has produced settlement traces of the Koban Culture and of Early Alanic date (Fig. 1). Further Koban and Alanic settlement areas are located on the upper slopes around the Paravos rock. Extensive burial grounds with Koban, Sarmatian and Alanic graves occupy the lower slopes, mainly on the southern side (cemetery III). Excavations carried out there before 1993 uncovered some 350 graves, most of them belonging to the prehistoric Koban Culture, but also about 100 Sarmatian and Alanic graves.<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork in 1994–1996 in cemeteries III and IV added another 52 graves, with more than 100 individuals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> В.С. Флёрв, *Аланы Центрального Предкавказья V-VIII вв.: обряд обезвреживания погребенных*. Труды Клин-Ярской экспедиции I. Москва 2000.

<sup>2</sup> H. Härke, A. Belinsky, „Nouvelles fouilles de 1994–1996 dans la nécropole de Klin-Yar,“ in M. Kazanski, V. Soupault, eds., *Les sites archéologiques en Crimée et au Caucase durant l'Antiquité tardive et le haut Moyen Age*. Colloquia Pontica 5. Leiden 2000, 193–

The Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age graves of the Koban Culture almost invariably held single inhumations, with the skeleton deposited crouched on the side (males on the right, females on the left). The graves were shallow rectangular pits, with some cases of stone lining and/or stone covers (Fig. 2). As in the later periods, the body had been deposited fully dressed, with ornaments for females, and tools and weapons for the males; a single pottery vessel was found with all skeletons. The outstanding finds from this phase of the cemetery are two Assyrian helmets which testify to connections south across the Caucasus Mountains, and to the use of symbols of status and prestige in the earliest settled community at this place.<sup>3</sup>

The basic features of the Sarmatian and Alanic burial rite at Klin-Yar comprise dressed inhumation with grave-goods, as in the Koban period, but now the grave construction included underground chambers (catacombs; Fig. 2). Most bodies were laid out in an extended position or slightly flexed. In the Sarmatian phase, the chamber was accessed by a pit or short access corridor (*dromos*) which was in most cases aligned east-west. In some cases, the deposition of a horse 'skin' (i.e. head-and-hooves deposition, with skull and lower leg bones) was observed on, or in, the *dromos*. The entrance from the *dromos* to the chamber was always closed with large stones. As a rule, Sarmatian chambers contained a single body, and double burials were constructed by linking single-burial chambers with a short *dromos*; but double burial within a single chamber started in the Late Sarmatian period. The range of types of grave-goods was limited, with most graves containing pottery vessels, and some beads, brooches and earrings found with females, and weapons and tools found with some males.

Early Alanic grave construction and ritual were similar to the Sarmatian, but more elaborate in all aspects.<sup>4</sup> The catacombs were larger and deeper, and occasionally had additional features such as pits or niches; *dromoi* were longer and predominantly orientated around north-south, with the entrance at the northern end blocked with large stones (Fig. 2). Sacrificial depositions in, or on, the *dromos* became more frequent and varied in the Alanic phase, including horses or horse skins, pottery, less often weapons or parts of horse harness.<sup>5</sup> There was evidence of fire in several *dromoi*, and the entrance to the chamber had usually been closed carefully with stones and with clay smeared around the edges. In the majority of

210; A. B. Belinskij, H. Härke, *The Iron Age to early medieval cemetery of Klin-Yar: excavations 1994–96*. Forschungen in Eurasien series. Berlin, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> A. Б. Белинский, „К вопросу о времени появления шлемов ассирийского типа на Северном Кавказе.“ *Советская археология* 4 (1990), 190–195.

<sup>4</sup> For parallels, see Г. Е. Афанасьев, А. П. Рунич, *Мокрая Балка 1: Дневник раскопок*. Москва 2001.

<sup>5</sup> H. Härke, A. B. Belinskij, „Trauer, Ahnenkult, Sozialstatus? Überlegungen zur Interpretation der Befunde im Gräberfeld von Klin-Yar (Nordkaukasus, Russland),“ in C. Kümmel, B. Schweizer, U. Veit with M. Augstein, eds., *Körperinszenierung - Objektsammlung - Monumentalisierung: Totenritual und Grabkult in frühen Gesellschaften*. Tübinger Archäologische Taschenbücher 6. Münster, New York, München and Berlin 2008, 417–430.

cases, Alanic catacombs contained more than one body, occasionally up to four. The variety and quantity of grave-goods increased markedly in the Early Alanic period: well-equipped graves produced sets of pottery and other vessels, series of female dress ornaments and accessories (such as bags), weapons, belt sets and boot fittings with males, and horse harness.

The human bones were too badly preserved for the analysis of ancient DNA (which had been one of the original aims of the project), but a detailed anthropological and bone chemistry study of the skeletons has managed to produce an overall picture of the populations of the three phases at Klin-Yar, using the material from the 1994–1996 excavations as well as that from older excavations at this site.<sup>6</sup> According to the anthropological data, the Koban people were a native farming population, with a lifestyle and diet typical of an agricultural economy. The Sarmatians were immigrants at Klin-Yar, but their new male phenotype, combined with a continuity of the Koban female type, suggests that this may have been a male-only immigration. The Sarmatian lifestyle was that of mobile livestock breeders, with a high proportion of meat in their diet. This seems to agree with the absence of Sarmatian settlement traces at Klin-Yar, in contrast to the extensive settlement finds of the Koban and Alanic phases. The skeletal data indicate that the Alans represent a second immigration into the area, with new male and female phenotypes. Their diet contained significantly less meat than that of the Sarmatians, implying a more mixed economy. Stable isotope data obtained as part of a series of radiocarbon dates of Klin-Yar bone material give reason to believe that the Alanic population buried in the cemetery sector IV, north of the Paravos rock, had a geographical origin different from that of the Klin-Yar III population.<sup>7</sup>

### *The elite plot*

A concentration of big and well-furnished catacombs of the Late Sarmatian and Early Alanic phases was found and excavated in the main trench of the 1994–1996 expedition (Fig. 3). It was located in cemetery III, about 300 meters south of the eastern tip of the Paravos rock. With two exceptions, it contains the richest catacombs of these two phases excavated so far at Klin-Yar. The exceptions are a rich Alanic catacomb (234) found before 1994 immediately to the east of our main trench, and a very rich, early Alanic catacomb (389) found after 1996 during rescue excavations about 40 meters east-southeast of the centre of the elite plot. It therefore seems that the elite plot extends somewhat further east and southeast than the main trench of 1994–1996, but we may have found most of the rich catacombs belonging to this socially distinctive cemetery area.

The indicators of elite status at Klin-Yar are all concentrated in this cemetery area (Fig. 3). Status in the Late Sarmatian phase is signalled by iron long swords

<sup>6</sup> Buzhilova et al., in Belinskij–Härke, *The Iron Age to early medieval cemetery of Klin-Yar*.

<sup>7</sup> T. Higham personal communication; cf. also T. Higham, et. al. "Radiocarbon dating, stable isotope analysis, and diet-derived offsets in <sup>14</sup>C ages from the Klin-Yar site, Russian North Caucasus." *Radiocarbon* 52 (2010), 653–670.

(in graves 351A, 361B and 365) and gold earrings. Elite indicators among the Early Alanic grave-goods found in this area are three bronze bowls (out of five so far found at Klin-Yar), four glass vessels (the only ones found at this site) and three Byzantine coins (two *solidi* of Tiberius Mauritius in grave 341, and one *solidus* of Heraclius and sons on a necklace in 363; only one other gold coin had previously been found at Klin-Yar). Other conspicuous grave-goods in the elite plot include five iron long swords (in Alanic graves 357 and 360, in addition to the Sarmatian cases mentioned above) and five iron stirrups (in Alanic graves 341, 360 and 363). The Sarmatian and Alanic graves in this area have also produced an entire series of artificially deformed skulls, supplying a further indication of elite status. There are 14 sacrificial depositions of horse 'skins' and entire horses in, on and next to dromoi in the elite plot; the Alanic catacomb 360 alone has four of them. The man with a deformed skull buried in catacomb 360 (dated to early/mid-seventh century AD) undoubtedly belonged to the top level of Early Alanic society in the North Caucasus. A sword of Central Asian or Avar type, with characteristic P-shaped mounts and a richly gold-decorated sword belt, was lying at his side, a horse harness with silver fittings had been deposited at his feet, and an Iranian glass cup near his head. The latter is an intriguing contrast to the Byzantine coin on the gold necklace in the immediately adjacent catacomb 363. An earlier counterpart of the man in grave 360 is the fifth-century catacomb 389 which had been furnished, among other rich depositions, with a gold-decorated saddle.

The detailed dating of the graves supplied by I. Gavritukin and V. Malashev makes it possible to reconstruct the sequence of grave construction in the elite plot (Table 1). Significantly, all Sarmatian catacombs in this area date to the Late Sarmatian period (phase RZ); they were spread evenly across the area of the plot, but with a concentration of double burials in the southern half. Alanic catacombs then filled up the spaces in between the Sarmatian graves, in the fifth and sixth centuries AD (phase I after Malashev and Gavritukhin) more in the northern half of the plot, and in the seventh century AD (phase III) equally in the northern and southern halves. The absence of graves from phase II is a further indication that some rich graves may be located in unexcavated areas just outside of our main trench. Even so, translating the relative dates into absolute ones, there appear to have been about three catacombs each built in the fifth and sixth centuries, two or three in the early to mid-seventh century, and four in the late seventh to early eighth century.

The overall number of burials from all phases in the elite plot, in relation to the time span they cover, need not imply more than one high-status family, or at the most two families, burying their dead over some 300 to 350 years (or about 12 to 15 generations). By the seventh century, two groups of large and/or rich catacombs can be discerned: a central group with two robbed graves (364 and 368) and two outstandingly rich ones (360 and 363); and a southern group with two strikingly similar, well-equipped catacombs (341 and 345) and one unique, rich 'shaft grave' (352). There is a series of epigenetic (non-metric) skeletal traits linking several individuals in the central and northern parts of the elite plot (359,

363/2, 371/1, 373, and 381/1), confirming the likely existence of a family relationship between the elite members buried here.

The impression of a family pattern is further enhanced by the changing gender pattern of burial from the Late Sarmatian to the Early Alanic periods.<sup>8</sup> Late Sarmatian graves in the elite plot contained single burials; double burials (342, 351 and 361) were constructed by linking two single-burial catacombs with a short *dromos* or an access pit (Fig. 4). In the Early Alanic period, double and multiple burials were in each case deposited in the same chamber. There is clear evidence of re-opening of Alanic catacombs and later deposition of bodies and grave-goods, most obviously so in graves 357 and 363. In some large catacombs with single bodies, there had been space left for later depositions, for example in grave 371 where a woman had been buried with a small child at her feet, leaving half of the chamber free for a later burial. Where two adults had been buried, these were invariably a male and a female. The male body was always at the entrance into the chamber, and the woman away from it, at the far wall; where there was a third body, it was in most cases a juvenile placed between the two adult bodies in their conventional positions. All these observations suggest that the catacombs in the elite plot were used as family or kin-group vaults from the Early Alanic period onwards, but not yet in the Late Sarmatian period.

#### *Implications and conclusions*

The elite plot of cemetery III at Klin-Yar appears to be, so far, a unique phenomenon in the North Caucasus. There do not seem to be any comparable concentrations of the richest graves in other Early Alanic cemeteries of the region,<sup>9</sup> but this may also be an effect of widespread grave-robbing there. In the late sixth/early seventh centuries, the background of the local wealth was probably military service by local Alanic men for the Byzantine Empire or its enemies,<sup>10</sup> and the proximity of the Silk Road, a seventh-century branch of which is thought to have run in the Podkumok valley, past Klin-Yar. The background of the earlier wealth, in the fifth/early sixth centuries, is much harder to fathom and still needs a convincing explanation.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Klin-Yar elite plot is the continuity from the Late Sarmatian to the Early Alanic period. This is remarkable because the anthropological data suggest an immigration at the beginning of the Alanic period. The continuity of the elite plot implies a stability of social patterns through this immigration phase.

<sup>8</sup> H. Härke with A.B. Belinskij, N. Stoodley, „Die Darstellung von Geschlechtergrenzen im frühmittelalterlichen Grabritual: Normalität oder Problem?“, in W. Pohl, H. Reimitz, eds., *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Denkschrift 287 = Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 1. Wien 2000, 181-196.

<sup>9</sup> Д. С. Коробов, *Социальная организация алан Северного Кавказа IV-IX вв.* Санкт-Петербург 2003.

<sup>10</sup> S. Savenko, in Belinskij, Härke, *The Iron Age to early medieval cemetery of Klin-Yar*.

The increasing emphasis on family or kin-group burial in the elite plot during the Early Alanic period, and the epigenetic evidence for family relationships may signal the beginnings of a hereditary aristocracy at a time which is considerably earlier than has been assumed so far, quite possibly as early as the fifth century. The existence and the date of the Klin-Yar elite plot may also force us to re-think the emergence of the Alanic state in the North Caucasus and perhaps look for its origins in the seventh century, rather than the currently accepted date of the tenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the discovery and excavation of the elite plot during the 1994–1996 expeditions has highlighted the importance of Klin-Yar as a key archeological site for early Alanic history in the North Caucasus.

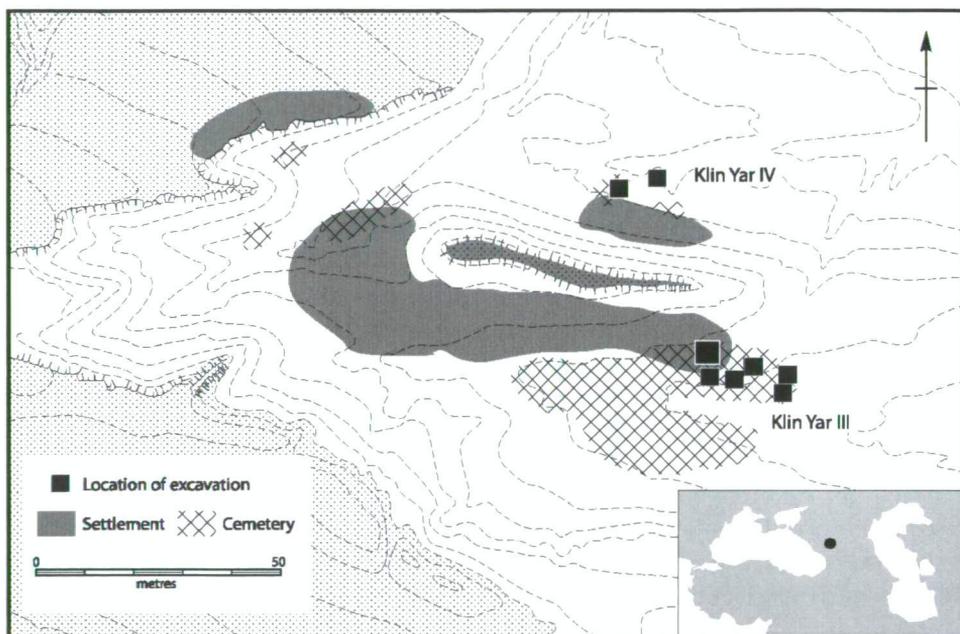


FIGURE 1.  
Map of the Klin-Yar site, with the locations of trenches  
of the 1994–1996 expedition

11D. Korobov, in Belinskij, Härke, *The Iron Age to early medieval cemetery of Klin-Yar*.

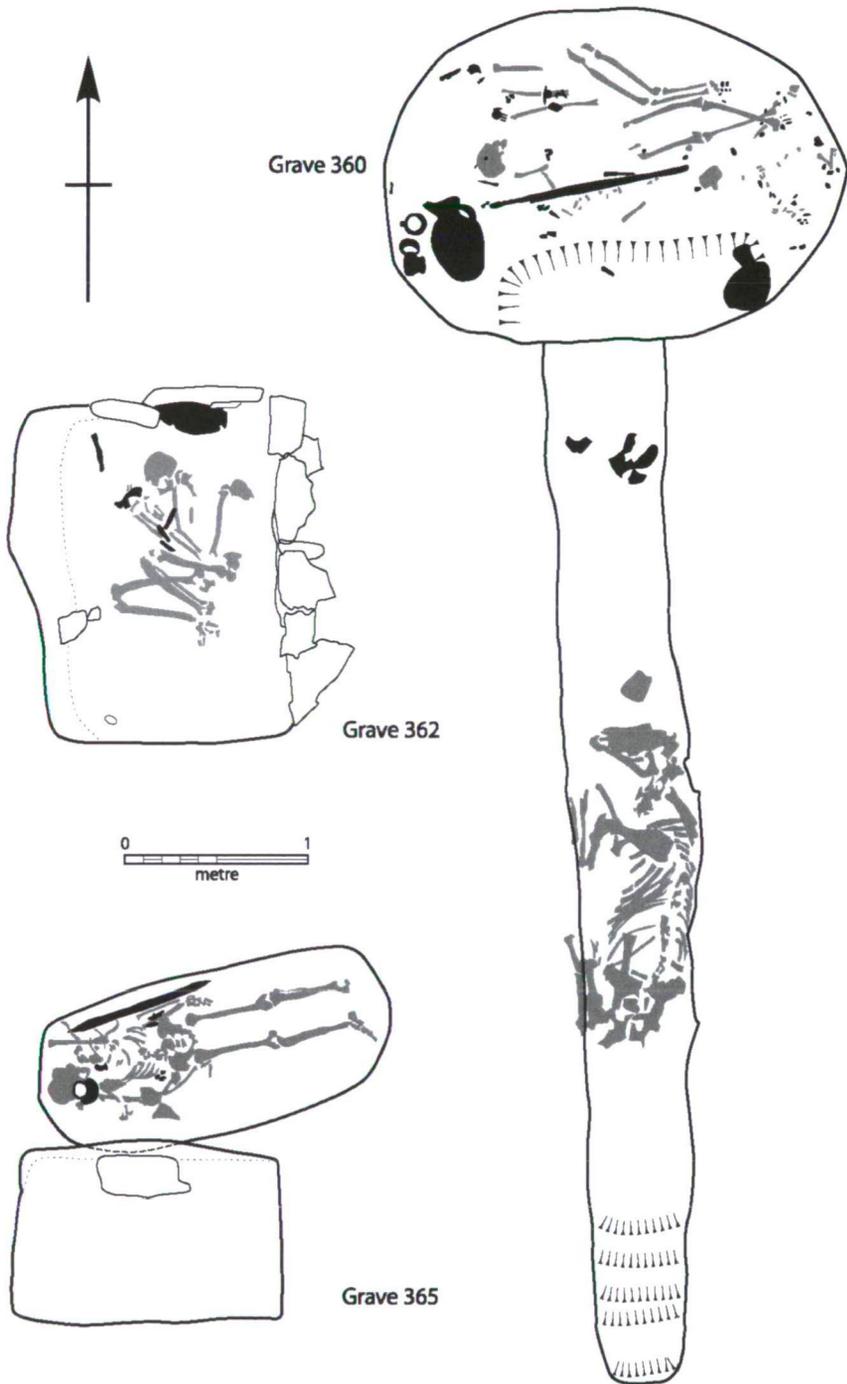


FIGURE 2.  
Grave types of the three periods at Klin-Yar: Koban (grave 362), Sarmatian (365)  
and Alanic (360)

KLIN\_YAR 1994-96  
elite plot

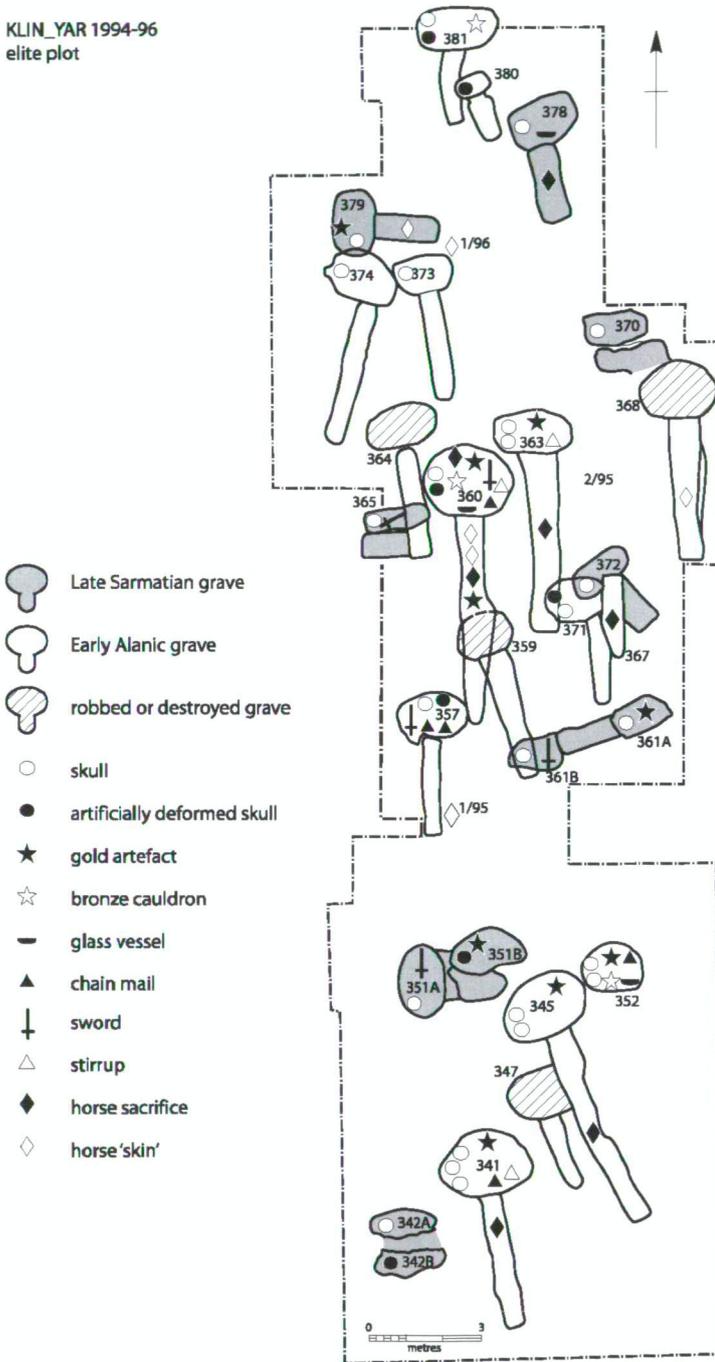


FIGURE 3.

Plan of the elite plot of Klin-Yar III, with Late Sarmatian and Early Alanic graves excavated 1994–1996 (Koban graves omitted)

THE "ELITE PLOT" IN THE CEMETERY OF KLIN-YAR (RUSSIA)

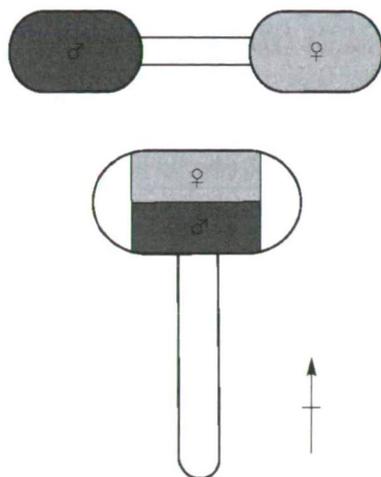


FIGURE 4.  
Pattern of Late Sarmatian (above) and Early Alanic (below)  
'family' burial in the elite plot of Klin-Yar III

TABLE 1.  
 Dates of Sarmatian and Alanic graves in the elite plot of Klin-Yar III  
 (after I. Gavritukhin and V. Malashev)

Grave no.	Phase (absolute date AD)
Grave no. 342	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 351A+B	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 361A+B	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 365	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 370	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 372	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 378	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 379	RZ (second half 4 <sup>th</sup> - early 5 <sup>th</sup> cent.)
Grave no. 359	I <sub>6</sub> - I <sub>B</sub> (430/450 - 520/540)
Grave no. 373	I <sub>B</sub> (470/480 - 520/540)
Grave no. 380	I <sub>B</sub> - I <sub>Г</sub> (470/480 - 550/580)
Grave no. 384	I <sub>B</sub> - I <sub>Г</sub> (470/480 - 550/580)
Grave no. 382	I <sub>Г</sub> (c. 500 - 550/580)
Grave no. 357	I <sub>Г</sub> - I <sub>Д</sub> (c. 500 - 580/600)
Grave no. 381	I <sub>Г</sub> - I <sub>Д</sub> (c. 500 - 580/600)
Grave no. 371	I <sub>a</sub> - I <sub>Д</sub> (c. 400 - 580/600)
Grave no. 352	III <sub>a</sub> (620/630 - 670/680)
Grave no. 360	III <sub>a</sub> (620/630 - 670/680)
Grave no. 341	III <sub>6</sub> (c. 650 - 680/720)
Grave no. 345	III <sub>6</sub> (c. 650 - 680/720)
Grave no. 363	III <sub>6</sub> (c. 650 - 680/720)
Grave no. 374	III <sub>6</sub> (c. 650 - 680/720)
Grave no. 368	III <sub>a</sub> - III <sub>B</sub> (620/630 - 730/760)