

## **Podolia as a contact area in the 3rd millennium BC: Kurgans on the rivers Murafa and Riv**

Podolia – a historical and geographical region – is the westernmost part of the Eastern European forest-steppe, lying in Ukraine. The cultural significance of this region in prehistory was to a large extent a consequence of its location at the crossroads of natural contact routes, running north-south and east-west. On the one hand, Podolia's two major rivers – the Dniester and the Southern Bug – flowing northwest-southeast, join the region to the steppe zone, bordering it in the south, while their tributaries rise in the north – in the borderland of the forest zone. On the other hand, both rivers like their tributaries, have sections flowing latitudinally, while their drainage basins are interconnected. These form a natural connection to the Dnieper drainage basin that lies further east and the Vistula drainage basin, bordering the region in the west to northwest. As a result, Podolia forms a particular cultural bridge between the east and west of Europe. Although the watercourse network did not determine the behaviour of human groups, it nonetheless could facilitate the movement of, and contacts between, communities of various origin.

The purpose of the project is the identification of intercultural contacts of communities that in the 3rd mill. BC lived in the part of Podolia located between the Dniester and the Southern Bug. The study area lies on the watershed of these two rivers, within their tributaries (Murafa and Riv), southwest of Vinnitsa. It is characterized by the occurrence of burial mounds, which have not been investigated so far. The features of their location as well as their forms suggest that the majority of barrows date to the 3rd mill. BC.

The planned project will involve field investigations – non-invasive surveys and excavations carried out by a team of Polish and Ukrainian researchers. Non-invasive investigations will consist of several methods, including satellite imagery analysis, detailed surface and geomagnetic survey as well as topographic mapping. The first stage of research aims at identifying kurgan architecture on the Murafa and Riv rivers, and on this basis – a selection of barrows shall be made for further examination, involving excavation works. Graves located under kurgans and in their mounds will be explored, while any organic remains found (human, animal and plant) as well as artefacts will be subjected to many-sided specialist analyses.

The obtained results will be evaluated in a broad comparative context, providing us with knowledge on the builders and users of kurgans on the rivers Murafa and Riv; specifically about their relations with human communities from the eastern European steppe and forest-steppe, and central Europe.