
SWORDS AND SWORDSMEN IN GRECO-SCYTHIAN ART

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Abstract: In this article, we shall analyse pieces of the late 5th-4th centuries BC of Greco-Scythian art with depictions of bladed weaponry. "Barbarians" armed with swords and daggers were mostly represented by using Greek art templates. The figures are distinguishable by their Scythian "ethnographic" features (costumes, hair, weapons). Despite the usual detailed manner in which individual attire and sometimes even the human faces or other weapons were rendered, the depictions of swords and daggers remain, however, very simplified. It is possible that the Greeks were prevented from depicting a "truly Scythian" sword, which personified the Scythian war god. Still, detailed images of weaponry can be found on the Scythian stelae. This paradox may be explained by both the work of Scythian sculptors and because of the mythological connection between stelae, the identification of swords with the chthonic deity Ares, and the death realm.

Rezumat: Articolul analizează piesele de artă Greco-scitică din sec. V-IV a.Chr. pe care se pot observa reprezentări ale armelor cu lamă. Imaginile cu "barbari" înarmați cu spade și pumnale au fost modelate folosind elemente de artă greacă. Figurile se disting prin trăsăturile lor etnografice scitice (costume, păr, arme). În ciuda modului obișnuit detaliat în care ținuta individuală și uneori chiar fețele umane sau alte arme au fost redată, reprezentările spadelor și pumnalelor rămân, totuși, foarte simplificate. S-ar putea ca grecii să fi fost împiedicați să înfățișeze o spadă cu adevărat scitică, care personifică zeul scit al războiului. Totuși, imagini detaliate ale armelor pot fi găsite pe stelele scitice. Acest paradox poate fi explicat atât prin opera sculptorilor sciți, cât și datorită conexiunii mitologice dintre stele, identificarea săbiilor cu zeitatea ctoniană Ares și țărâmul morții.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Iron Age, toreutics, sword, cult of Ares.

Cuvinte cheie: Europa de est, epoca fierului, toreutică, spadă, cultul lui Ares.

INTRODUCTION

In the Early Iron Age, the territory of modern-day Ukraine was a crossroads of various cultures. Communities of the forest-steppe were closely tied with peoples of Central Europe; as vast steppe landscapes became open for nomadic hordes from the East. By the middle 7th century BC the northern shores of the Black Sea appeared to have become the northernmost area of Greek colonisation. Soon after their first appearance in the

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written sources in the 670 BC, the Early Scythians¹ had conquered local forest-steppe farming communities and had established regular contacts with the Greeks.²

Thus, fate had brought the Greeks and Scythians together in Eastern Europe. During their prolonged interaction, the influence of classical civilisation on the nomadic world was tremendous. Its brightest manifestations are considered to be the appearance of anthropomorphic personages in the Scythian art in the 5th century BC.³ Later, the 4th century BC marked the high point of Greek influence, with widespread penetration of Greek motifs in the Scythian culture. This led to the appearance of the bright phenomenon later called Greco-Scythian art. It reflects the specific tastes of Scythian society combined with Greek craftsmanship and iconographic templates.⁴ These representations reflect different levels of craftsmanship, diverse art styles and trends. In this article, we present our analysis of swords and swordsmen depicted on the toreutics mostly made of precious metals.

The amount of works concerned by the study of Greco-Scythian art is indeed tremendous.⁵ However, only a few have raised the question, considered in our paper.⁶ At the same time, most scholars agree that the sword could, in special circumstances, be considered by the Scythians as an embodiment of their war god.⁷ It is especially hard to think otherwise while having Herodotus's testimony: "An antique iron sword is planted

¹ Caspar Meyer pointed out that "the major problem of Scythian archaeology is that the precise meaning of the term "Scythian" is rarely explained" (Meyer 2013, 98). Agreeing with him, we should stress that by this term we mean both nomadic and sedentary communities, who lived North from the Black Sea (mostly in the area between Danube and Don rivers) from early 7th till the very end of 4th century BC and leave behind many kurgans and settlements that were grouped within the archaeological culture of the same name. All other close and faraway neighbouring peoples cannot be called Scythians in its original meaning.

² Shelekhan 2020, 162.

³ Бессонова 1983, 81; Yatsenko 2012, 63, note 1.

⁴ Yatsenko 2012, 63-70; Русяева 2013, 440.

⁵ e.g.: Rostovtzeff 1922, 93-112; Boardman 1980, 256-264; Jacobson 1995; Treister 1999, 2001, cat. XI-XVIII, 127-160; Meyer 2013 and many others. However, we want to refer here to the apt words by Caspar Meyer: "Greco-Scythian art has been beyond the scope of mainstream archaeological scholarship in the West for so long that a synoptic survey would inevitably fail to do justice to the richness and real interest of past encounters with the material." So, most of the works in the study area were written in Slavic languages.

⁶ Трейстер 2012, 619; Lifantii, Shelekhan 2021.

⁷ Бессонова 1984, 3-5; Алексеев 1980, 39; Гершкович, Ромашко 2013, 11-12. For example, Yurii Alekseev pointed out that only swords with cross guards of special form, which the researcher considers as phallic, could serve as Ares's embodiment (Алексеев 1980, 45). See the critique of this suggestion in Shelekhan 2020, 42-43.

on the top of every such mound, and **serves as the image of Mars**⁸: yearly sacrifices of cattle and of horses are made to it, and more victims are offered thus than to all the rest of their gods.”⁹

ANALYSED MATERIALS

The full description of the analysed artefacts was given in many specially dedicated papers and catalogues,¹⁰ so we will only mention the main earlier proposed interpretations of the battle scenes. The general information about the analysed artefacts is presented in Table 1.

As already mentioned, there are plenty of analogies to these scenes to be found in the Greek art. Two key characteristics of Greco-Scythian toreutics which are known to have originated from the Hellenic pictorial tradition are bas-relief compositions and placement of figures.¹¹ The products of Greco-Scythian toreutics can be attributed to masters from the Bosporean state or the Eastern Mediterranean, many of whom could work in Panticapaeum.¹² The possibility that these items were imported directly from Ancient Greece should also not be ruled out.¹³

The most of described masterpieces were made in the 4th century BC and were placed in “royal” or elite Scythian graves about the same time (Table 1). In some cases, we could say that artefacts could have been in use for several decades¹⁴ but that is rather an exception than a rule.

Also, most of the described items are unique (see Table 2). However, there are two series of duplicated gold covers for the sword scabbards and *gorytoi* that could have been made on one matrix. They were named after the Chortomlyk barrow, where such items were found first. Scholars unanimously consider the whole composition here to be a typical battle scene adopted from the Greek tradition. For instance, the Chortomlyk sheath series finds analogies among monumental sculptures of the Eastern Mediterranean region: sarcophagi from Sidon, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus *etc.* Thus, researchers interpret the image on this sheath series (Fig. 1) as the Battle of

⁸ Mars is the Roman version of the Greeks god name Ares and Herodotus used the Greek name (Ἄρεος).

⁹ Hdt 4.62, translated by George Rawlinson. London: Edward Henry Blakeney Publisher, 1910. **Underlining** our own.

¹⁰ See the literature listed in Table 1.

¹¹ Treister 1999; Русяева 2013.

¹² Boardman 1980, 259-264; Meyer 2013, 3; Русяева 2013, 440; Савостина 2014, 35, 38.

¹³ Andronikos 1984, 181-186; Treister 1999, 79; Русяева 2013, 437.

¹⁴ e.g. long term of usage was proposed for the Solokha comb (Манцевич 1987, 60; Boardman 1994, 210; Алексеев 2003, 75).

Marathon, the Trojan War, some specially selected scenes of Greco-Persian combat or the campaigns of Alexander the Great.¹⁵

Table 1. Finds with depictions of swords and swordsmen in Greco-Scythian art.

	Monument name and location	Figure No.	Item	Year of find	Date	Literature
The Chortomlyk sword sheath series						
1.	Chortomlyk barrow, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.		sword sheath gold cover	1863	4 th century BC	Алексеев и др. 1991
2.	Barrow No. 8 of Piat` Brat`ev (Five Brothers) barrow of the Elizavetovka necropolis, Russian Federation. Kept in the Rostov local lore museum, Rostov-on-Don.		sword sheath gold cover	1959	4 th century BC	Шилов 1962
3.	Chaian barrow. Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine. Kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.	Fig. 1	sword sheath gold cover	1880s	4 th century BC	Shceglov, Katz 1991
The Chortomlyk gorytoi series						
4.	Chortomlyk barrow, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.	Fig. 3	gorytos gold cover	1863	4 th century BC	Алексеев и др. 1991
5.	Illintsi barrow, Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine. Was kept in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, lost during WWII.		gorytos gold cover	1902	4 th century BC	Черненко 1981
6.	Melitopol barrow, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.		gorytos gold cover	1954	4 th century BC	Reeder 1999, cat. 105
7.	Barrow No.8 from the Piat` Brat`ev of the Elizavetovka necropolis, Russian Federation. Kept in the Rostov local lore museum, Rostov-on-Don.		gorytos gold cover	1959	4 th century BC	Шилов 1962

¹⁵ Hamdy Bey and Reinage 1892, pl. 10; Мальмберг 1894, 187; Переводчикова 1993, 66; Jacobson 1995, 245; Cook 2005, 42; Раевский 1980, 61, 63-66; Русяева 2013, 439.

Unique Solokha gorytos						
8.	Solokha barrow, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.	Fig. 6	gorytos silver cover	1913	end of the 5 th – beg. of the 4 th century BC	Манцевич 1987
Unique Solokha comb						
9.	Solokha barrow, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.	Fig. 4	gold comb	1913	end of the 5 th – beg. of the 4 th century BC	Манцевич 1987
Unique Perederiieva Mohyla cone						
10.	Perederiieva Mohyla barrow, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.	Fig. 7	gold cone or "helmet"	1988	4 th century BC	Моруженко 1992; Reeder 1999, cat. 124
Unique Sengileevskoe-2 cone						
11.	Sengileevskoe-2 barrow No. 1, grave No. 2, Russian Federation. Kept in the Pyatigorsk local lore museum, Pyatigorsk.	Fig. 9	gold cone	2014	4 th century BC	Curry 2016
Unique Haimanova bowl						
12.	Haimanova Mohyla barrow, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.	Fig. 11	silver gilded bowl	1969	4 th century BC	Бидзиля, Полин 2012
Unique Novosilka temporal pendants pair						
13.	Barrow No.4 near Novosilka village, Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.	Fig. 12	gold temporal pendants	1901	4 th century BC	Bydłowski 1904; Reeder 1999, cat. 19
Unique Sakhnivka headdress plate						
14.	Sakhnivka barrow, Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine. Kept in the Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.	Fig. 13	headdress plaque or diadem	1901	4 th century BC	Reeder 1999, cat. 40

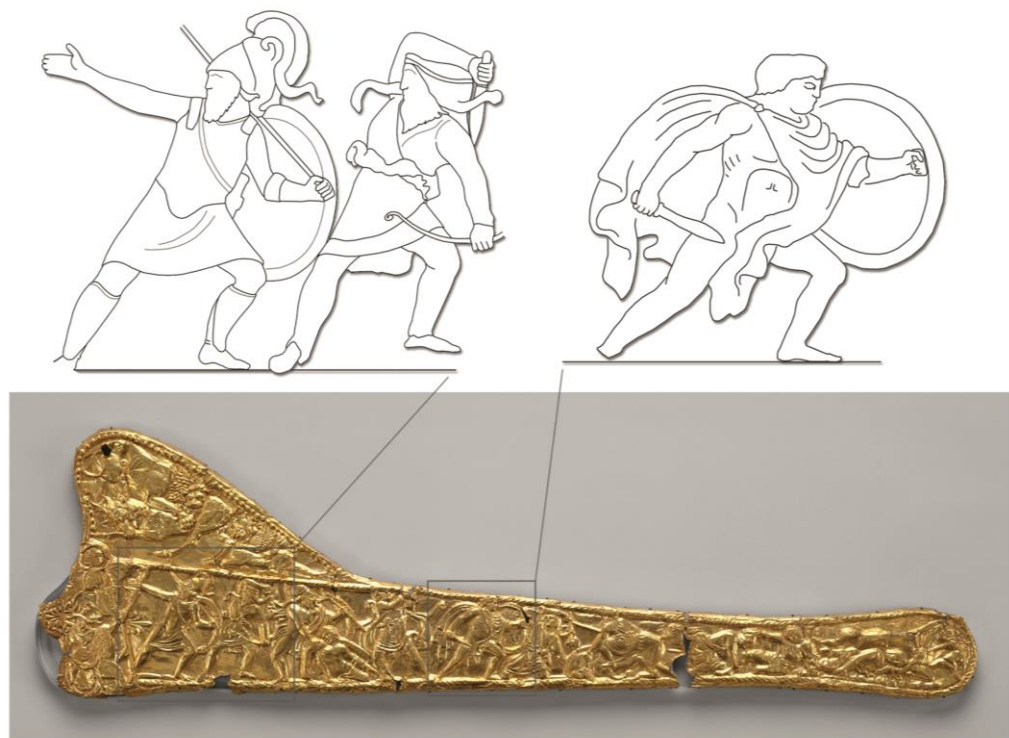


Fig. 1. The battle scene on the sword scabbard overlays from Chorthomlyk series (photo after metmuseum.org).

There are two swordsmen depicted in the Chortomlyk sheath series: a lightly equipped barbarian and a half-naked hoplite equipped with a large shield and a short *xiphos*. They are pictured in typical poses for Ancient Greek art.¹⁶ Scholars agree that these scenes in the Chorthomlyk *gorytoi* series (Fig. 3) are an illustration of Achilles' biography.¹⁷

¹⁶ See for example the *calathus* (Greek headgear in the form of a basket) from the royal Bol'shaya Bliznicza barrow (Fig. 2).

¹⁷ Robert 1889, 151-153; Treister 1999, 71 and many others. The idea of K. Stähler and H.-H. Nieswandt's notion that they in fact represent Iranian epic scenes, depicting the accumulation of power through marriage (Stähler and Nieswandt 1992, 90, 102-108), has not gained a lot of support among scholars.



Fig. 2. Amazons and griffins battle on the *calathus* from Bol'shaya Bliznicza barrow (photo after Власова 2010).

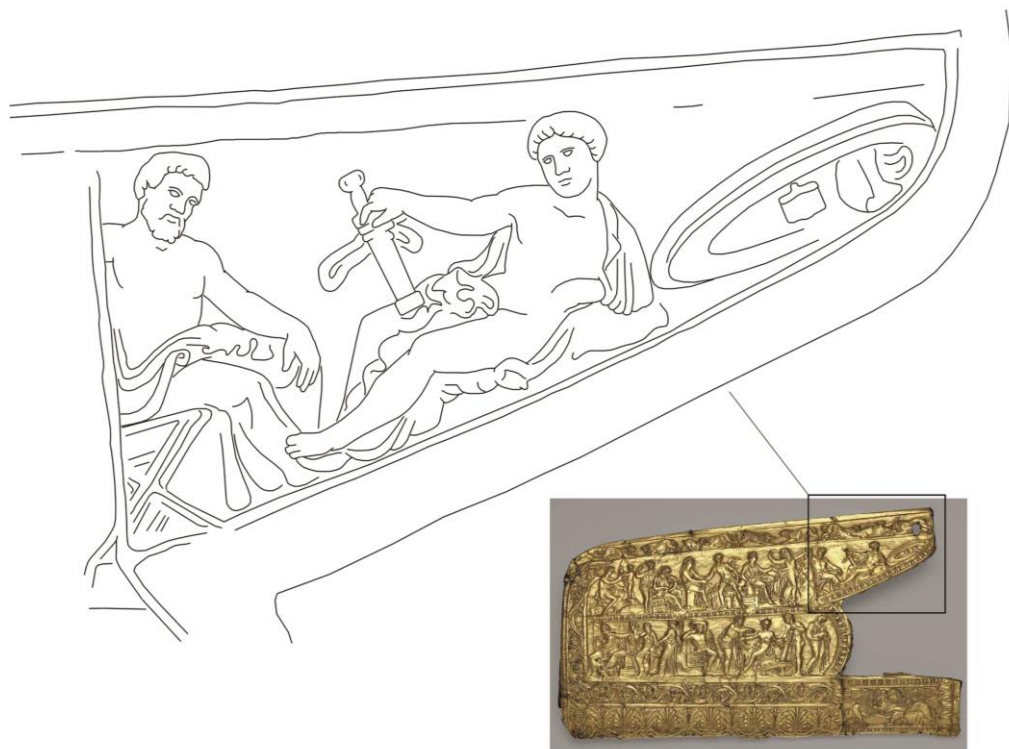


Fig. 3. Figure with a sword on the *gorytoi* from Chorthomlyk barrow (photo after Алексеев 2012).

One of the most famous Scythian period finds is the late 5th century BC comb from the Solokha barrow (Fig. 4, Table 1). There are several main interpretations of the scene presented here: the conflict between the sons of the Scythian ruler Ariapeithes¹⁸, or the one we consider as more relevant, the episode, that is known from the work of Gaius Valerius Flaccus “*Argonautica*” (1st c. AD), describing the killing of Colaxes¹⁹ (Scythes) by his older brothers.²⁰

¹⁸ Indeed, the uncharacteristic placement of a dagger sheath on the left man’s hip was considered as an indication of the ruler’s son Scyles, who was influenced by Greek culture (Алексеев 2003, 75, 78-79; see also Манцевич 1987, 57; Ермоленко 2019, 219)

¹⁹ It should be noted that the varying translations of names from Herodotus “*The Histories*” will be given from the translation of George Rawlinson. However, Gaius Valerius Flaccus names them differently: Colaxes (resp. Colaxais), Apres (resp. Arpoxais) and Auchus (resp. Leipoxais).

²⁰ Раевский 2006, 145-146; see also Блаватский 1964, 30.

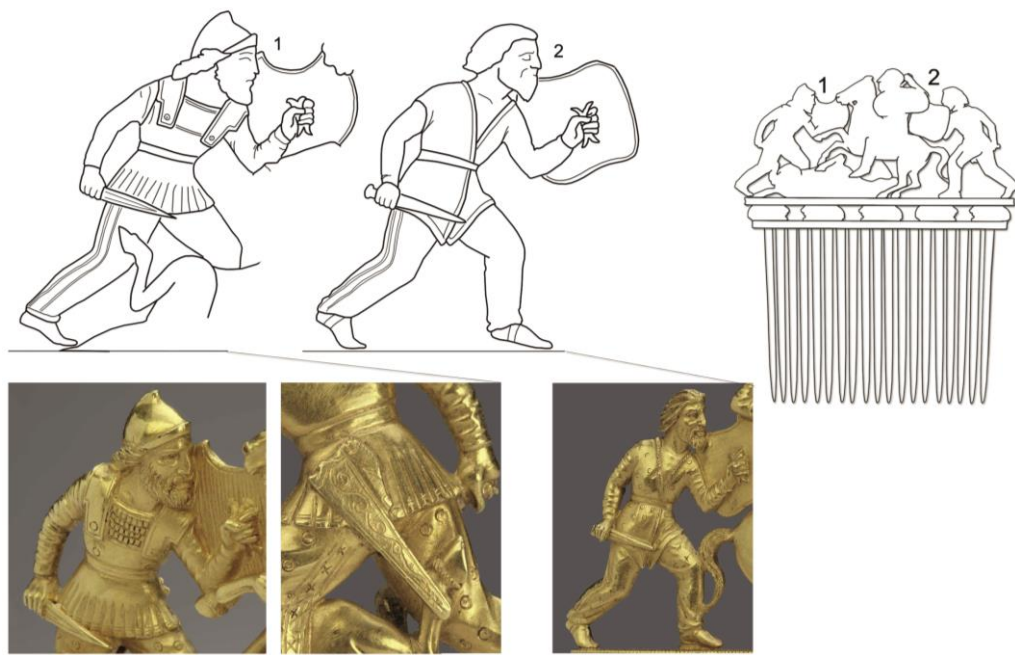


Fig. 4. The battle scene on the comb from Solokha barrow (photos after Алексеев 2012).

Scholars suggested that the Solokha comb composition looks similar to the spatial arrangement on the Parthenon frieze, on the sarcophagi from Sidon, Philip II's tomb in Vergina, the tomb in Alexandrovo, on the Dexileos funerary stele, the Solokha bowl and the Prussy plate, amongst others.²¹ The figures of footmen were compared to the personages on the frieze of Hephaisteion (the Hephaestus Temple in Athens), reliefs of the Heroon of Trysa and Bosphorus toreutics.²² One could also mention the depiction on the *rhyton* from barrow No.4 near Ulyap aul (Fig. 5) where a typical gigantomachy scene is played out.²³

²¹ Jacobson 1995, 161; Boardman 1985, fig. 96; Jenkins 2002; Cosmopoulos 2004, 46; Hamdy Bey and Reinage 1892, pl. 27; Andronikos 1984; Русяева 2013, 439; Bouzek 2000, 106; Fornasier 2001, 264, 268.

²² Онайко 1970, 44.

²³ Лесков 1987, 40; Ксенофонтова 1997, 60-77; Treister 2000, 99; see also Boardman 1985, 171-172.

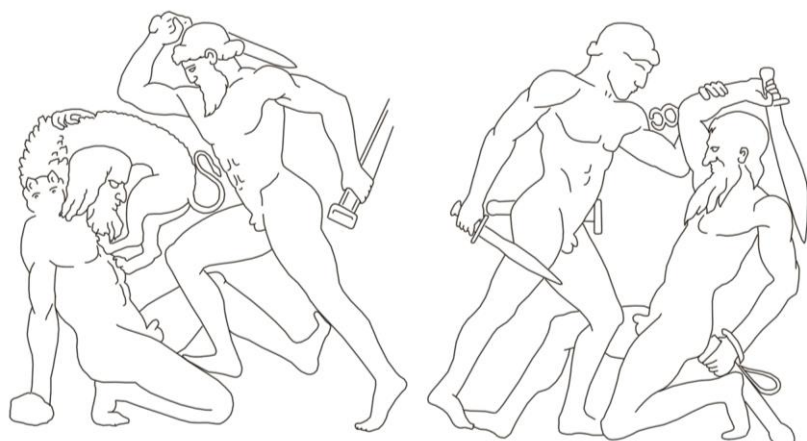


Fig. 5. Heroes with swords on the rhyton from barrow No. 4 near aul Ulyap (photo after Лесков 1987).

The Solokha *gorytos* has the depiction of three young footmen fighting with two older mounted warriors (Fig. 6, Table 1). The figure of a fallen horseman has analogies in the friezes of the Nereid Monument in Xanthos and on the Temple of Athena Nike in Athens.²⁴ The scene of dragging an enemy down from a horse was often used by sculptors creating Amazonomachy depictions. An interesting analogy is an image on the *gorytos* from Vergina: here the hoplites' battle is depicted. The difference lay only in the absence of the horse and the nakedness of the Greeks.²⁵

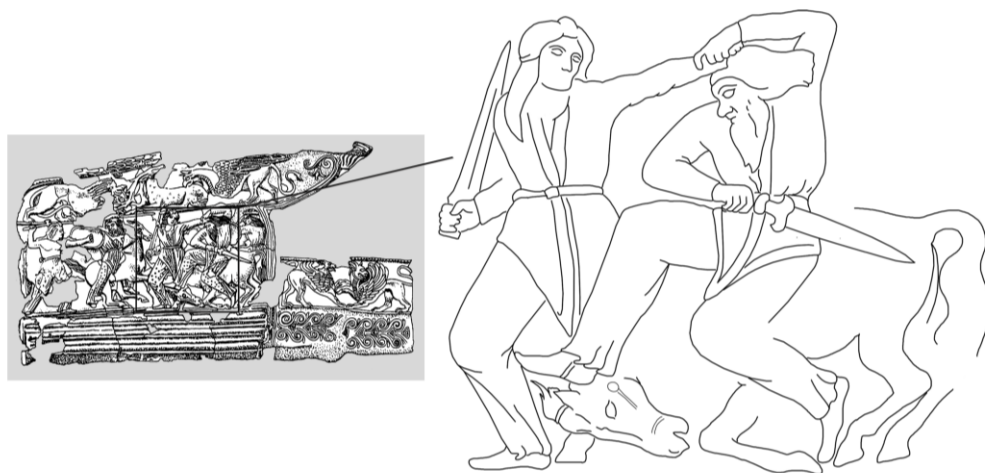


Fig. 6. The battle scene on the *gorytos* from the Solokha barrow (drawing after Манцевич 1987).

The scenes from the 4th century BC cone from Perederiieva Mohyla barrow (Fig. 7, Table 1) are believed to be taken from Herodotus' "Histories", describing a war between Scythians and the descendants of their one-time slaves or it could be depicting the strife between Scythian dynastic leaders, or perhaps the sons of the mythical Scythian hero Colaxais.²⁶ The relief from the Yubilejnoe settlement on the Taman peninsula (Fig. 8) is worth mentioning as an analogy.²⁷ Besides this example, numerous analogies are known in Amazonomachy scenes and in the vase painting tradition.²⁸

²⁴ Coupel and Demargne, 1969, pl. 48, 50; Boardman 1985, fig. 127; Онайко 1970, 24; Русяева 2013, 439; Higgs 2006, 172, fig. 53; Velentza 2014, 76, fig. 2.

²⁵ Штупперрих 2001, 76-77; Бергеман 2001, 121; Ермоленко 2019, 223-224; Черненко 1981, 71; Andronikos 1984, 180-186; Meyer 2013, fig. 69.

²⁶ Моруженко 1992, 87; Полидович 2019, 229; see also Кубышев и др. 2009, 34-49.

²⁷ Савостина 2001, 288-29.

²⁸ Штупперрих 2001, 81; Бергеман 2001, 121.

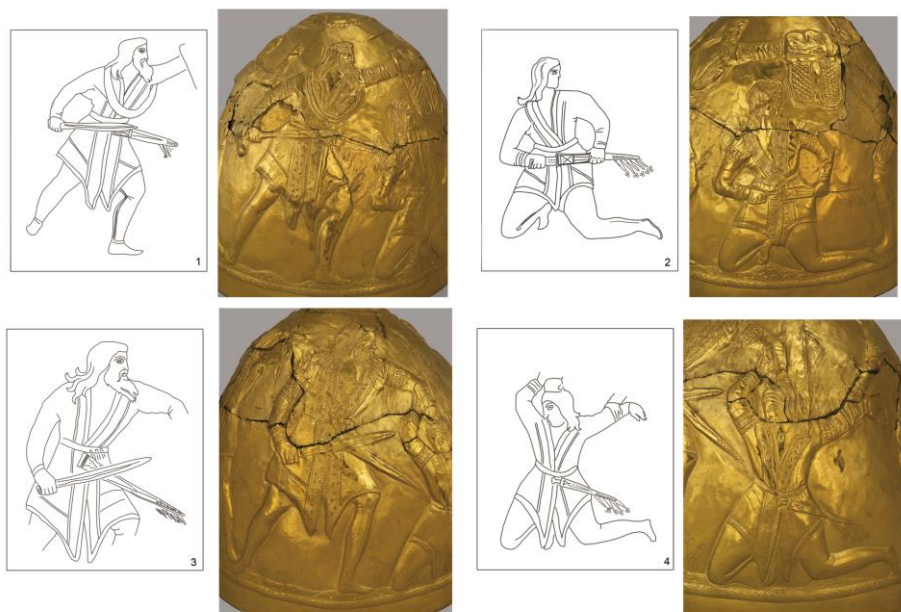


Fig. 7. Swordsmen on the cone from the Perederiieva Mohyla barrow (photos after Полидович 2019).

The cone from the Sengileevskoe-2 barrow (Fig. 9) was found quite recently and a detailed description is yet to be published (Table 1). One of the battle scenes is stylistically similar to the find from Perederiieva Mohyla and to the relief from the Yubilejnoe settlement. A confrontation between old and young Scythians is depicted here, but in this case, the superiority of the older warriors is obvious. In the first scene, the younger runs to the senior while pulling out his sword. The second scene shows the two warriors fighting with short swords. One of them is in the process of unsheathing his sword, but the older warrior manages to grab him by the hair and is ready to strike. Finally, in the third scene, the younger warrior is on his knees, while the older Scythian holds him by the hair and makes a deadly stab with his sword into his *Supraclavicular fossa*.²⁹

That fact that the defeated pose is marked by grabbing an opponent's hair could be a reference to the scalping tradition or the making of skull bowls and treating the head as the vessel of power. Perhaps the absolute advantage of the winner side was shown using an image of a warrior holding their defeated opponent by the hair. One could also recall the hypothesis about the purpose of cones as a container for scalps.³⁰

²⁹ Curry 2016; see also Савостина 2014, 33.

³⁰ Ольховский 2001, 154-155; Виноградов, Горончаровский 2008, 63; Кубышев и др. 2009, 42.



Fig. 8. The relief from the Yubilejnoe settlement (drawing by authors after Савостина 2001).

The only image of a Scythian with a sword in a “peaceful state” can be found on a Haimanova Mohyla bowl of the second quarter of the 4th century BC (Fig. 11, Table 1). A detailed style in rendering “ethnographic” features (attire, hairstyle etc) as the “Scythian” points to the Greek origin of the makers. The composition has a lot in common with images on the bowls from the Kul-Oba and Chastye Kurgany barrows. The similarity to the Greek design is also seen in the “squeezing” of figures into limited space, as seen on the *gorytos* from Vergina. The range of interpretations for this bowl is quite broad. Scholars have varyingly considered it to be a scene of diplomatic negotiations, as part of an ethnogenetic legend, or as some other mythological story.³¹ Here, a sword is placed in the foreground and its proportions are quite large. Its handle is ornamented with notches on the edge, an oval pommel and an accurate depiction of a triangular blade is accurately shown. The craftsman was probably familiar with the sword type drawn here.

³¹ Бидзиля, Полин 2012, 421; Переводчикова, 1993, 66; Трейстер 2012, 615.



Fig. 9. The battle scenes on the cone from the Sengileevskoe-2 barrow (drawings by Яценко 2020, photo after Curry 2016).



Fig. 10. Ritual scenes on the cone from the Kurdzhips barrow (drawing by authors after Галанина 1980, photo after Яценко 2020).



Fig. 11. Hero with a sword on the bowl from the Haimanova Mohyla barrow (photo by the National Museum of History of Ukraine).

The next images are quite simplistic and originate from the Forest-Steppe area, namely from the Novosilka and Sakhnivka barrows. The 4th century BC temporal pendants from the Novosilka barrow No.4 (Fig. 12, Table 1) contain an image that has several interpretations. The low level of detail prevents us from describing the victim of a griffin as an Amazon. However, their short hair and large facial features point to their masculinity. It is also hard to say whether this man should be understood as one-eyed, like the mythical Arimaspi who fought griffins. Svitlana Bessonova treats this image as a symbol of reincarnation through death, or as the depiction of the tragic demise of a hero or sun deity (perhaps this was Colaxais?).³²



Fig. 12. The duel with a griffin on the pendants from barrow No.4 near the Novosilka village (photo by the National Museum of History of Ukraine).

Bladed weapons also occur in sacrificial scenes. We shall focus on one of the compositions on the 4th century BC headdress applique from the Sakhnivka barrow (Fig. 13, Table 1). Here, two men are depicted kneeling. One of them holds the other, half-naked, by the hair and prepares to stab him in the back with a dagger. Scholars have seen in the victim either an anonymous captured warrior or the Scythian hero Colaxais.³³

³² Скржинская 2008, 240; Бессонова 1983, 19.

³³ Вертієнко 2015, 96; see also Reeder 1999, cat. 40.

Table 2. Weapons and scenes depicted on the analysed finds.

Site	Object type	Scene	Narrative	Type of blade(s)	Accuracy of detail	Other weapons in the panoply of the warrior	Other weapons in the scene
Barrows of Chortomlyk, No. 8 of Piat' Brat'ev, of Chaian	sword sheath gold covers	Collective fight	Greek Myth	Scene 1: dagger Scene 2: short xiphos	Scene 1: lacking guard Scene 2: unclear guard	Scene 1: bow Scene 2: shield	Scene 1: helmet, shield, spear, greave
Barrows of Chortomlyk, Illintsi, Melitopol, No.8 of Piat' Brat'ev	gorytos gold covers	Relaxed conversation	Greek Myth	xiphos	not Scythian	shield, helmet	–
Solokha barrow	gorytos silver cover	Collective fight	Greek text about Scythians	swords	First - lacking guard, second - unclear guard	horse	axes, shields, horse
Solokha barrow	gold comb	Collective fight	Greek text about Scythians	daggers and one sheath	lacking guard, sheath with lateral ledge	armoury, shields	helmet, armoury, qorytos with bow and arrows, shield, spear, greave, horse
Perederiieva Mohyla barrow	gold cone or "helmet"	Collective fight	Greek text about Scythians	swords	lacking guards, sheaths without lateral ledges	sheaths	one shield, qoryti with bows and arrows, spears
Sengileevskoe-2 barrow No. 1, grave No. 2	gold cone	Duels	Potentially Local Narrative	swords	lacking guards, sheaths without lateral ledges	sheaths, qorytos with bow and arrows	qoryti with bows and arrows
Haimanova Mohyla barrow	silver gilded bowl	Relaxed conversation	Greek text about Scythians	sword	lacking guards, sheaths without lateral leges	sheath, shield, whip (?)	whip (?), qorytos with bow and arrows
Barrow No.4 near Novosilka	gold temporal pendants	Duel	Potentially Local Narrative	dagger	low	–	griifin as an opponent
Sakhnivka barrow	headdress plaque or diadem	Sacrifice	Potentially Local Narrative	dagger	low	–	–

The dagger is embossed quite simplistically. It is represented only by a short triangular blade. Nevertheless, some scholars have attributed that appliqué to the products of Greek goldsmiths. The craftsman, building a multi-figured composition

with different groups of people, was able to imitate monumental art samples, such as frescoes from Greek temples.³⁴



Fig. 13. The sacrificial scene on the applique from the Sakhnivka barrow (photo by the National Museum of History of Ukraine).

DISCUSSION

An adjusted Greek style

We would like to stress that the reference point for the design of all images described above was not three-dimensional sculptures, but profile images from relief friezes and vase paintings.³⁵ These battle-scene compositions are not replicated, they do not belong to one stylistic or genre group. However, we can say that the barbarians have two main poses (attacking and defensive) and two main actions (a stab from below and a blow from above, or the so-called Harmodius blow), which fit the Greek art patterns.³⁶ Harmodius and Aristogeiton were tyrant-slayers who killed the Athenian ruler Hipparchus. Their deeds were recreated in many masterpieces and the image became a crucial one in the canon of Greek art.³⁷ Monumental images served as a conduit for state propaganda and standardised images were borrowed and recycled in objects of mobile art, even on the far periphery of the Greek world. Albeit to a lesser extent, the action of stabbing into the *supraclavicular fossa* follows this pattern.³⁸

³⁴ Бессонова 1983, 101.

³⁵ e.g.: Онайко 1970, 44; Tobin 1975.

³⁶ Cook 1989, 57.

³⁷ Boardman 1985, 25-26, 2001, 274.

³⁸ For example, see: Hamdy Bey and Reinage, 1892, pl. 29; Селиванова 2009, 138.

The composition where the defeated figure stands on their knees while the winner holds the opponent by the hair also has many parallels in the Greek tradition. Such representations can be interpreted as scenes of sacrifice, or as an illustration of certain myths.³⁹

When interpreting the scene of the duel between a hoplite and a barbarian on the sheath from Chortomlyk, it should be taken into account the different possible readings of the image. Some scholars see a barbarian as being the one on offensive;⁴⁰ it is more likely however that he had been intended to be a loser, depicted in the defensive posture of a warrior soon to be defeated.⁴¹

Similarly, when reading an artistic "text" on a cone from Perederiieva Mohyla, the plot should be understood from a scene where a young Scythian holds a sword (Fig. 7/2) to another, where his opponent grabbed him by the hair (Fig. 7/4).⁴² A sketch of this fragment from Perederiieva Mohyla has been reproduced in several articles in a way that leaves the victim with an empty sheath on his belt.⁴³ However, we can clearly see the handle of the sword, although it is simplistically rendered.

When picturing a certain plot, the artisans did not show battle tactics.⁴⁴ Instead, they depicted duels, characteristic for the mythological epic. Therefore, the type of weapon wielded became an identification marker of a certain hero. The images of swordsmen, made according to the patterns of Greek tradition, must be interpreted with extreme care by modern scholars when using them to analyse Scythian weapons or to reconstruct Scythian tactics.

However, the craftsmen did not blindly copy Greek images. Dmitrii Raevskij showed that the Scythians interpreted them from the standpoint of their worldview. Therefore, only certain plots related to the heroic epic, such as struggle, trials, and initiations, to name a few examples, were borrowed.⁴⁵ Numerous ethnographic features show a native adaptation of many images. We can see Scythians dressed in traditional *caftans*, soft boots (*σκυθικαι*) and, of course, pants. A Scythian look was also given to the details of the armaments.⁴⁶ However, when placed against this background, swords and daggers look like alien elements.

³⁹ Селиванова 2009, 135-136.

⁴⁰ Онайко 1970, 28.

⁴¹ Мальмберг 1894, 185.

⁴² Полидович 2019, 237, 241; see the opposite point of view: Савостина 2001, 289.

⁴³ For example, see: Моруженко 1992, fig. 7.

⁴⁴ Бергеман 2001, 118; Скржинская 2008, 238.

⁴⁵ Раевский 2006, 456-458.

⁴⁶ Graef 1901, 92; Трейстер 2012, 616.

Two swords are depicted on the sheathes of the Chortomlyk series (Fig. 1). In the outlines of the central figure's blade, it is easy to perceive the classic Greek *xiphos*. As for the barbarian archer, Andrei Alekseev has argued that the short dagger in his hand is a *makhaira*, which is not beyond question.⁴⁷

Detailed representations of swords and Inconsistencies in the Greco-Scythian art

Detailed images of bladed weapons are known from the cone from Perederiieva Mohyla (Fig. 7). It has a carefully depicted sheath fringe trim, decorative tassels and perhaps leather woven ornaments at one stage.⁴⁸ Alekseev has written that one of the old warriors pictured here stands with a single-edged *makhaira* in hands.⁴⁹ However, a straight double-edged blade with symmetrical extension at the point is pictured here. Therefore, it is more likely to be seen as either a Greek *xiphos* or, more likely, an abstract indistinct image of a blade.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that a sword or dagger is often shown without a cross guard. One should note an example of a dagger without a cross guard on the cheek-pieces found in the Ohuz barrow⁵¹. In this case, it probably indicates the influence of the Balkan artistic tradition. Analogies can be found in the scene of a ram sacrifice on a ceremonial helmet from Coțofenești, and in the case of the Kerch rhyton, which has been interpreted as a provincial Greco-Thracian product.⁵²

In all other cases this is hardly a coincidence because even if an initial uncertain image was obtained by a craftsman, he himself then finished the small details with liners and planishers.⁵³ For example, on the sheath from Chortomlyk, the muscular relief of the naked warrior was clearly elaborated, while the details of the sheath cover from the Chaian barrow were neglected by the craftsman. As a result, the figure from Chortomlyk looks slimmer, more athletic and aesthetically attractive.

And if on the artefacts from Sakhnivka (Fig. 13) and Novosilka (Fig. 12) the image of the weapon is shown in a quite simplistic way, the same cannot be said about other items. The equipment of footmen from the Solokha comb is detailed to the point that the longitudinal grooves on the blades of the daggers are pictured (Fig. 4).

The same is true for the swords depicted on the cone from the Perederiieva Mohyla barrow (Fig. 7) and the dagger on the cone from Sengileevskoe-2 (Fig. 9)

⁴⁷ Roux 1964; Langner 2013; Алексеев 2006.

⁴⁸ Полидович 2019, 235.

⁴⁹ Алексеев 2006, 53, fig. 3,3.

⁵⁰ See, for example Скуднева 1960; Meyer 2013.

⁵¹ Фиалко 1995, fig.1.

⁵² Маразов 1975, 1980.

⁵³ Онайко 1974, 78; Минасян 1991, 380.

where vertical notches are also carved on the pommels. Yurii Polidovich writes that small straight crossguards can be seen on the swords depicted on the cone from Perederiieva Mohyla. Despite this assertion, he still identifies them with a Sindo-Maeotian-type, which are known to have no crossguards.⁵⁴ In fact, there is an edge to the mouth of the sheath in one case and the edge of an index finger in another that under certain lighting looks like a cross guard.

The representations of daggers or short swords on the relief from Yubilejnoe also have no crossguards (Fig. 8), though some scholars call them *akinakes*.⁵⁵ In this case, the idea that swords of the Sindo-Maeotian type are those depicted here seems to be more substantiated. It has been assumed that the image of non-Scythian swords was intended to emphasise the local, Taman, realities. Besides, swords of the Sindo-Maeotian type were pictured on a cone from the Kurdzhips barrow (Fig. 10).⁵⁶ Next, the sword on the bowl from Haimanova Mohyla draws our attention (Fig. 11). It is pictured in its sheath, which itself has wavy ornamentation. Woven or openwork leather sheath applications have been recorded by archaeologists;⁵⁷ but Mikhail Treister has pointed out that this image is different from these archaeological finds and instead has identified it as a Sindo-Maeotian sword.⁵⁸

We feel it is right to dispute the route Treister has taken to reach his conclusions. First, one cannot agree with the statement that the oval pommel of the sword does not correspond to the archaeological realities. The handle of the sword shows notches on the edges (perhaps an imitation of the winding?), although this is only to be found in exceptional cases for swords of the Sindo-Maeotian type.⁵⁹ This feature brings the depicted sword closer to the Scythian type. As for the blade, its triangular shape is common to the bladed weapons of the 4th century BC, both Scythian and Sindo-Maeotian types.

Speaking of the crossguards, the most important marker in this case, we cannot be sure about its presence, because in this place the image was damaged. However, judging by the preserved part, the mouth of the sheath clearly obscures the blade, partly touching the handle, while the crossguards of Scythian swords, as a rule, did not enter the sheaths, protruding above the mouth.⁶⁰ Therefore, it is still worth agreeing with Treister's assertion of the absence of crossguards. Finally, the absence of a lateral ledge on the sheath convinces us of the non-Scythian character of the sword.

⁵⁴ Полидович 2019, 235.

⁵⁵ Штутперих 2011, 79.

⁵⁶ Ольховский 2001, 150-154; Виноградов, Горончаровский 2008, 62-63, 65-67.

⁵⁷ e.g. Бобринский 1901, 20

⁵⁸ Трейстер 2012, 619.

⁵⁹ Смирнов 1980, 38, fig. 3, 11; Эрлих 1991, 77.

⁶⁰ Полидович 2014, 155.

Therefore, the sword from Haimanova bowl is more similar to Sindo-Maeotian samples than Scythian ones, although it does not absolutely match the design of any known examples of Scythian swords.

Speaking of sheaths, Scythian specimens have three key characteristics (Fig. 14): a lateral ledge, a mouth that repeats the shape of the cross guard without covering it completely, and, optionally, a chape or an extension at the point.⁶¹ As a rule, all these details were ignored on the artistic reproductions. The only exception is one of the figures of the Solokha comb, although in this case the Scythian sheath was placed on the left side of the warrior in a way that makes it look quite unusual.

Considering the swords depicted on the *gorytos* from Solokha (Fig. 6), there are clearly different types of weapons shown here. The old barbarian has a sword on his belt with a rounded pommel and a triangular cross guard, typical for classical Scythian specimens. The second sword, in the hand of a young footman, is depicted without a cross guard. If this is not a random simplification, we can assume one more time that the master has decided to depict a Sindo-Maeotian sword.⁶² Mikhail Rostovtzeff has suggested that the battle between the Scythians and Maeotians is depicted here, although his assumption was based on the image of an axe.⁶³ However, we do not have sufficient grounds to suppose that the traditions of images with historical narrative plots were known by Scythians. Rather it is more accurate to interpret these images as illustrations of a heroic epic.⁶⁴ Then another question arises: why does the equipment of a Scythian aristocrat have a scene where heroes with non-Scythian weapons prevail?

The inconsistency between the images of Scythian bladed weapons and real samples is surprising because other weaponry is depicted in detail with what Rostovtzeff called “ethnographic realism”.⁶⁵ This, he argued, can be seen in the image of asymmetrical sigma-shaped bows, *gorytoi* and armour. The Greeks were certainly familiar with Scythian swords, not least as they decorated them. Also, Scythian-type swords are fully represented in both Greek and Maeotian necropolises.⁶⁶ Thereby, it is impossible to explain the unrealistic nature of weapon depictions by the ignorance of its shape.

⁶¹ Полидович 2014.

⁶² Ольховский 2001, 156-157.

⁶³ Rostovtzeff 1922, 40.

⁶⁴ Блаватский 1964, 30.

⁶⁵ Rostovtzeff 1922, 109.

⁶⁶ Скуднива 1960; Лесков и др. 2005; Виноградов, Горончаровский 2008.



Fig. 14. Scythian late 5th-4th century BC ceremonial swords: 1. Velyka Bilozerka, barrow 30; 2. Tovsta Mohyla (drawing by authors after Reeder 1999).

Representations of bladed weapons in other contexts

At the same time, examples of quite realistic images of bladed weapons are known among Savromatian antiquities. The scene on the blade of the Filippovka sword shows a sacrifice. Two men killing a deer with swords are depicted here. Despite the simple patterns of the composition, we can clearly see details of the swords, their handles with pommels and crossguards.⁶⁷

Also, one can mention pieces of Achaemenid art. First of all, the gold plate from the Oxus treasure comes to mind. Compared to Greco-Scythian toreutics, this product is much simpler. However, a West Asian *akinakes* is clearly pictured on the man's belt.⁶⁸ Another striking example is the silver rhyton from Erebuni. On the rider's right thigh, a typical *akinakes*, like those originating in Media, is shown simplistically but extremely accurately.⁶⁹

It is also impossible not to mention samples of stone reliefs from Persepolis or the royal tombs at the Naqsh-e Rostam. The ancient masters emphasised two main ethnographic features of the depicted tribes: their clothing and weapons. The Saka are distinguished by double-breasted kaftans, pointed caps on their heads and, again, typical *akinakes* on their belts.⁷⁰

Typical *akinakes* depictions are present on the 4th century BC Persian coins from Anatolia. Despite the small size of the artefacts, certain types of weapons are clearly seen on them. It is worth mentioning, that images of the Greek/Roman gods including Ares could be depicted on some of the coins together with an *akinakes*.⁷¹

Thus, the distortion of the shape of swords in Greco-Scythian toreutics does not seem accidental. The question then arises: should not the bladed weapon depicted on the precious insignia of the Scythian aristocracy be a cultural indicator? Indeed, the bow and *gorytos*, whose extremely detailed images are often present in the toreutics, had great importance in the Scythian ideology.⁷² The significance of the sword also occupies a not insignificant place in the iconographic tradition. For example, it is assumed that the *makhaira* image in Greek art accompanied scenes of unfair and unjust actions.⁷³

⁶⁷ Яблонский и др. 2011, 236.

⁶⁸ Dalton 1964, 19.

⁶⁹ Трейстер 2013а, 370.

⁷⁰ Schmidt 1957, pl. 37, 65; Trümpelmann 1992.

⁷¹ Erdan 2021.

⁷² Бессонова 1983, 22-24; Вертиенко 2010.

⁷³ Roux 1964, 38.

A taboo?

The answer may lie in the peculiarities of the Scythian worldview. As mentioned above, from the “Scythian logos” of Herodotus, we know that the sword was the embodiment or personification of the Scythian deity of war (Hdt 4.62), named by the author as Ares. Svitlana Bessonova suggests that the Scythian name of the god of war was tabooed.⁷⁴ Developing this idea, it can be concluded that an image of the true sword-god was also prohibited. The ban could have concerned craftsmen of non-Scythian origin who worked on these products. However, the absence of the image of Ares-sword on the toreutic could be explained simply due to the plot of the depicted myth. Virtually all cultural heroes, no matter how they are interpreted, do not hold a Scythian sword/Ares in their hands, but some abstract or foreign specimen. Thus, the craftsman showed that Ares is not among the range of depicted characters.

It is worth mentioning that some depictions on the Scythian ceremonial swords are considered symbolic images of the Scythian war god.⁷⁵ This concerns several bladed weapons: sheaths from Oleksandrivka⁷⁶ and Velyka Bilozerka barrows (Fig. 14/1), crossguard of the sword from Tovsta Mohyla barrow (Fig. 14/2), the lateral ledge of the sheath of a warrior figurine on Solokha comb.⁷⁷ There we can see whether a boar, his head or Pan⁷⁸. However, the presence of the boar head on the sheath from Solokha comb arose a reasonable doubt in a possible indication of the Scythian god of war. As we already mentioned the depiction of the sword on this comb is non-Scythian, the placement of the scabbard is also wrong. One can also mention that boars are quite popular in Scythian and Greco-Scythian art, but only in some cases scholars do consider them Ares’s representation. So, the depiction of a boar head on the Solokha comb and the abovementioned arguments push us to the conclusion that boar depictions on the Scythian scabbards cannot be an allusion to the Scythian god of war.

An additional argument in favour of our hypothesis can be found in the words of the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela (1 c. AD): “*Mars omnium deus; ei pro simulacris enses et cinctoria dedicant, hominesque pro victumis feriunt*”, that was translated by F.E. Romer as: “Mars is the god of all these peoples. To him, they dedicate swords and sword belts instead of images and sacrifice human beings instead of animals”⁷⁹ His

⁷⁴ Бессонова 1984, 4.

⁷⁵ Вертиченко 2014; Полидович 2015.

⁷⁶ Reeder 1999, cat. 47, 156-157.

⁷⁷ Вертиченко 2014, fig.5.

⁷⁸ See an opposite thoughts concerns Pan depiction here: Трейстер 2013b and Полидович 2015.

⁷⁹ Mela 2.14, translated F.E. Romer. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. Underlining our own.

words may also testify to the prohibition of the sword image in the cult of the Scythian Ares/Mars.

Swords as gods and ex-votos

The only items that have images of real Scythian bladed weapons are anthropomorphic stelae (Fig. 15). The sword here was one of the most typical attributes.⁸⁰ Therefore, despite the wide range of their semantics, it is possible to connect Scythian Ares and the sculptures with the image of the sword.⁸¹ One can also mention the bronze model of a sword from Medgidia in Romania. This artefact with hypertrophied features of the handle was interpreted as an application of the stele. The features of its decoration indicate a syncretic, Scythian-Thracian work.⁸²

The realism of the weapon images on the stelae may be related to their location – on top of the barrows. After all, according to Herodotus, the sword, as the embodiment of the god of war, was located on a top of a large altar (Hdt. 4.62). No such structure has been explored, however, votive weapons have been found, recorded on the top of the barrows. These findings may be related to the warriors' cult, although their context suggests that they are not the remains of stationary sanctuaries, but traces of one-time rites.⁸³

Sword altars have been found among the neighbours of Scythians. A unique find was recorded in the 4th century BC barrow, No. 1/1981, of the Maeotian necropolis near Ulyap aul. The skeleton of a young man was unearthed on the remains of a wooden platform, while his severed arm and sword were placed on the eastern slope. Therefore, scholars tend to interpret this mound as a sanctuary.⁸⁴

Another illustrative example is the late 7th century BC Big Warrior Mound on the Illyrian Romaja necropolis. The construction of the barrow and the arrangement of burials were preceded by the construction of an earthen platform with a sword stuck in the centre.⁸⁵ It should be noted that during the Archaic Scythian period, the local population had connections with the Eastern Hallstatt centres. Finds of Illyrian weapons are also known in the Dnieper region. Therefore, we can cautiously assume that the idea of worshipping the sword in this form could have come to the Scythians

⁸⁰ Мелюкова 1952, 128; Бессонова 1984, 12.

⁸¹ Ольховский 2005, 115-117.

⁸² Мелюкова 1976, 107; Полидович 2014, 298.

⁸³ Discussion see: Бессонова 1984; Гершкович, Ромішко 2013; Полин 2014.

⁸⁴ Балонов 1987, 41; see also Hdt 4.62.

⁸⁵ Djurić *et alii* 1975, 145.

from the west, although, of course, the origins of the cult of the warrior deity lie much deeper in the history of Iranian tribes.⁸⁶



Fig. 15. Scythian anthropomorphic stelae with depicted archaic (1–3) and classic (4–6) Scythian bladed weapon: 1. Novovasylivka; 2. Kozhum'iaky; 3. Olkhovchyk; 4. Ternivka; 5. Krasnodar; 6. Mariupol (drawing by authors after Ольховский 2005).

Thus, the Scythian sword mounted on the altar and depicted on the stele both could represent the Scythian god of war. Maybe they symbolised the middle zone of the Scythian universe – the air. The connection of Scythian Ares with the middle zone of the Scythian idea of the universe has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Бессонова 1984, 13-14; 1994, 169.

⁸⁷ Алексеев 1980, 44; Бессонова 1984, 7.

Therefore only in these sculptures, the sword had to be accurately pictured. In other cases, there was a taboo on such an image.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we can see that all considered samples of Greco-Scythian art with an image of a bladed weapon belong to the period of the classical Scythian culture of the late 5th-4th century BC. The combination of Scythian mythological subjects with Greek iconography reflects the nomads' close interaction with classical Mediterranean civilisation. The masterpieces of Greco-Scythian toreutics came from the workshops of the Bosporan Kingdom, although their creators were possibly helped by goldsmiths from the metropole.

Images of swordsmen are all made according to the patterns of Greek art. This is manifested in the principles of composition and their standard poses. However, the images of barbarian heroes were not blindly copied. They are distinguished by a whole set of Scythian ethnographic features. On the contrary, images of swords and daggers show an unusually high level of simplification and have virtually no equivalent in the Scythian material culture. This is manifested by the absence of cross guards and the lateral ledge of the scabbards.

In our opinion, craftsmen did not avoid the true image of the Scythian sword by accident. The Scythians may have had certain taboos surrounding the image of the sword that represented their god of war. This prohibition probably applied especially to goldsmiths, who were not Scythians by origin. It is no coincidence that Herodotus used the Greek name Ares to describe the Scythian god of war, so his real name remains a mystery.

The only exception to such realistic depictions is the Scythian anthropomorphic sculptures on which typical swords and daggers were often carved. The authentic representations of bladed weapons on the statues can be explained by the fact that the stelae, like the Sword-Ares, who was a chthonic deity, were associated with the realm of death and the afterlife. Besides that, Scythian carvers likely had "permission" for making this kind of depictions.

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