

doi:10.17746/1563-0110.2021.49.1.060-067

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Three Silver Dishes from Yugra

We introduce medieval silver dishes found near Peregrebnoye, Oktyabrsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, Western Siberia. In our opinion, they are associated with the Peregrebnoye I fortified site, dating to the late first to early second millennia AD. They may also have belonged to an Ob Ugric sanctuary. A chronological and cultural attribution of the dishes is proposed. The dish likely representing an ibex is considered to be Sogdian, belonging to the second stage of School A, according to B.I. Marshak. It has several parallels among the medieval silver vessels from the Kama basin. The tripod dish, showing a lion clawing a deer against a background decorated with a circular stamp, is either Sogdian or eastern Iranian, dating to late 8th to 10th centuries. The one representing a king riding a horse and accompanied by two warriors is a somewhat simplified replica of Sasanian prototypes, and could have been manufactured in one of the trade centers of eastern Iran or Central Asia no earlier than the 8th century—likely in the 9th–10th centuries. The Peregrebnoye finds are analyzed with reference to the 8th–10th century Sogdian and eastern Iranian silver vessels from the Lower Ob region. Their distribution area includes the Severnaya Sosva and Synya Rivers, and the vicinity of Berezovo.

Keywords: Silver, Peregrebnoye, Ob, Sogd, Iran, sanctuary.

Introduction

It has been reliably established that imported metal (silver and bronze) items had already appeared in northwestern Siberia in the Early Iron Age—more precisely, in the late first millennium BC to the early first millennium AD. These artifacts testify to the important process of development of mainstream cultures based on social adaptation, according to A.V. Golovnev (2009: 22). The cultures from northwestern Siberia can be called “the cultures of war and trade” (Fedorova, 2019: 8). This process started at the turn of the eras; it was marked by the first imported metal items, and ended in the second half of the 16th century with the accession of this region to the Russian State. Imported

items that reached Western Siberia later were relatively cheap products of Russian artisans (Baulo, 2013).

First imported items came to the North from the steppes of Siberia and Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region, and the Middle East. These were bronze cauldrons on trays, bronze mirrors of the Sarmatian circle, and glass or paste beads. Several silver plaques, which were cut from dishes or bowls manufactured in Western Asia, have been discovered. They show the direction of trade relations along the NS line, which had gradually declined by the mid first millennium AD.

Imported items of the Middle Ages were mainly silver and bronze dishes from Central Asia (Sogd), Middle East (Iran, Parthia, Byzantium and its provinces), and

Western Europe. The direction of trade routes changed; apparently, they passed from the Cis-Urals through the Urals, and along the EW line via the Northern latitudinal course. These imported items were deposited mostly in hoards, less often in burial grounds of the Middle Ages. It can also be assumed that some amount of silver and bronze items got to various sacred places.

Thus, it is possible to reach a conclusion about the gradual development of trade routes connecting the Western Siberian North with the centers of ancient and medieval civilizations, as well as about the emergence of a special social stratum in that territory, whose representatives collected imported precious things in their treasuries, some of which have come down to us as hoards or cult attributes. Therefore, finds and publication of hitherto unknown imported items have become extremely important in this regard.

During the fieldworks in 2018 in the village of Peregrebnoye in Oktyabrsky District of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, located on the right bank of the Ob River, one of the authors of this article had an opportunity to examine three silver dishes. They were in the possession of one of the inhabitants of the village and according to him, were found there by a relative of his long time ago.

A complex of archaeological sites dated to the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Ages has been discovered and partially explored near the settlement. The settlement of Peregrebnoye I belongs to the Middle Ages; the foundations of five log houses were uncovered, as well as remains of relatively powerful defensive structures. V.A. Mogilnikov dated that site to the late first to early second millennium AD (Yugoriya, 2000: 352). V.M. Morozov and S.G. Parkhimovich believed that there might have been a trading post in the early 2nd millennium AD (1985). Thus, accidental finding of three silver dishes in one place outside the monument complex, which well fit the history of interaction of the northwestern Siberia with the Urals, and through the Urals with the centers of medieval civilizations, raises doubts; although we do not have any evidence that the items belonged to the complex of the fortified settlement.

Description and attribution of dishware

Dish with representation of ibex (mountain goat?)

This round dish was made of silver in raising technique; the background of the central medallion was gilded;



Fig. 1. Dish with representation of ibex (mountain goat?).

details of the decoration were processed by punching (Fig. 1). Its diameter is 25 cm. The rim has the shape of a convex band. The central medallion is encircled by a belt filled with hatched triangles; three lotus-buds extend from the belt towards the center. An ibex (?) lying with its legs bent is depicted in the center against the gilded background; its long horns are bent above its back; an almond-shaped eye with the dot-pupil is encircled by a wavy line; the beard was ornamented with strokes parallel to its outline. There is a ribbon with diverging, as if flying, ends on the neck of the animal.

Parallels to the dish are known among the medieval silver vessels from hoards discovered in the Kama region (Smirnov, 1909: Cat. 107, 108; Orbeli, Trever, 1935: Pl. 24, 25; Darkevich, 1976: 19, 38–39, pl. 5, 1, 4). B.I. Marshak analyzed these in detail and attributed them to the Sogdian artisans of School A from ca 7th century (1971: 21–23). He observed the similarities typical of this school to both Sasanian and Sogdian traditions (Ibid.: 38, 41). V.P. Darkevich considered such items to be of the Eastern Iranian origin, and dated them to the 8th century (1976: 19, 38–39). Notably, both hoards that included vessels with the image of an ibex (mountain goat?) were found in the Perm Territory, near the villages of Sludka and Tomyz (Ibid.). In terms of the style of representation and ornamental décor, for example the design of lotus-buds, the vessel from Sludka is closer to the dish from Peregrebnoye; but the ribbon

on the animal's neck is not shown on the former dish. The ribbon is depicted on the neck of the ibex from the village of Tomyz, although the rest of ornamentation looks somewhat different. Believing that the dish from Tomyz represented the third stage of School A, Marshak wrote thus about it: "...the expressiveness [at the third stage – **the Authors**] of the image is weakening, with simultaneous sophistication of ornamentation" (1971: 22). From our point of view, it is quite possible to

attribute the dish from Peregrebnoye to the second stage of School A and consider it to be Sogdian in origin.

***Tripod dish with the composition
of a lion attacking a deer***

This dish is round, with a small everted rim and a flat bottom (Fig. 2, *a, b*). Its diameter is 32 cm. It was made



Fig. 2. Tripod dish with the composition of a lion attacking a deer.
a – photo; *b* – drawing; *c* – back of the item.

of silver in raising technique. The central medallion is gilded. The legs are shaped like the legs of an ungulate (horse?); one leg was broken off and is lost now (Fig. 2, c); the legs are wrapped in narrow strips of birch-bark. The decoration is placed against a background of round punch imprints. Floral ornamentation consisting of tripartite leaves runs along the rim. The center of the dish is decorated. An ornamental pattern of tripartite leaves, similar to the pattern decorating the rim, is along the edge. An ornamental band filled with four figures of lying deer is closer to the center: the front legs of the animals are bent; one back leg is also bent under the belly, and the other leg is stretched forward. The deer have branched antlers; their bodies are decorated with imprints from a small triangular punch; three deer have four ribs each, and the fourth one has three ribs. A composition of a lion attacking a deer is depicted in the round central medallion against the gilded background covered with imprints from a round punch. The lion is depicted in profile; its head is turned full-face; the body is decorated with the pattern of small scales; the neck is filled with imprints from a triangular punch; mane is short; muzzle of the animal resembles a human face. The deer lies with its legs bent; its head is bent under the chest; its antlers are short. The ribs of the deer are also shown.

Parallels and attribution. A dish with legs having the form of hoofed horse-legs was a part of the Repyovka hoard found in the Kama region (Smirnov, 1909: Cat. 135; Darkevich, 1976: 13, pl. 11, 3). Marshak identified it as a production of School B of Sogdian metal art. Darkevich considered the Repyovka dish to be the work of the artisans from the eastern regions of Central Asia, and dated it to the second half of the 8th to first half of the 9th century (1976: 13). Notably, similarities between the dishes from the Repyovka hoard and from Peregrebnoye are manifested only in the shape of the artifacts and, most importantly, in the presence of legs. On other dishes with similar decoration, the predator attacking a deer (as also the lying deer) were most often represented in side view. The lion attacking a bear is shown with its head turned full face only on one dish from the 7th–8th centuries (Trever, Lukonin, 1987: 118; Darkevich, 1976: 70, pl. 4, 2). This is where similarities end. A lion standing in an unusual posture, with its hind legs on the croup of the deer, is depicted on the dish from Peregrebnoye. Most often, lions were represented standing behind the defeated animal. A composition with a lion attacking a fallow deer appears on a Sogdian dish belonging to the 4th stage of School A (Marshak, 1971: 22). It seems that the predator is drawing the deer's neck to itself. The deer lies with its legs bent; one hind paw of the lion rests on its croup (Ibid.: Pl. T 20). The artifact probably dates back to the mid 8th–late 9th century (Ibid.: 73).

The ornamental decoration on the Peregrebnoye dish looks overloaded. It should be emphasized that all of its

elements were placed against a background of punch imprints, and images were decorated with ornamentation also using a punching tool—not round, but triangular. The decoration applied to the punched background is typical of Sogdian and Eastern Iranian toreutics: it often appears on buckets (Ibid.: Pl. T 20; Darkevich, 1976: Pl. 14) and cups (Marshak, 1971: Pl. T 20, 40, 42, 44, 46; Darkevich, 1976: Pl. 16, 17), or on a dish depicting a goddess with deer (Darkevich, 1976: Pl. 22, 1). According to Darkevich, cups with such decoration could have been produced in Fergana–Semirechye in the late 8th–early 9th centuries (Ibid.: 34, 39). When Marshak analyzed the dish with the representation of a nude woman and deer, which he attributed to School B and later stages of School C, he observed “traces of three legs it used to have” (1971: 34). However, both floral ornamentation and figurative representations have nothing in common with the dish from Peregrebnoye. Deer in such quantities and postures as those on the band of the dish under discussion have not yet been found anywhere.

The background processed by a punching tool and legs do not give grounds for confident attribution of the dish as Sogdian or Eastern Iranian, although its dating to the late 8th–10th centuries seems acceptable.

Dish with representation of a king on a horse and two warriors

The dish is flat, with a low rim and a convex band along the edge (Fig. 3, a). Its diameter is 33 cm. The decoration was made with fine punching. There is a small hole at the top of the dish. The composition consists of three images—a king on a horse, and two warriors on the sides. A crown with fluttering ribbon at the back is on the king's head. The crown has the form of a hoop. On the hoop, there are stepped figures, having the wings with curls expanding. The top of the crown is rounded. The king is shown in side view, while his shoulders are turned full-face. The beard is tied up; long hair ends in a curl, also tied. King's hawkish nose and eyebrows are stylized as a T-shaped elevation; the ears are small and are pressed to the head. A torque or round collar is on his neck. The king wears a long caftan decorated with ornamentation of circles; the lap in the back is folded. Crossed straps decorated with round plaques are on the chest and shoulders of the caftan. The king wears boots with ornamentation of a five-part semi-palmette with a long upper petal; folds are shown on the back of the boots. The left hand of the king rests on his sword-hilt, the upper part of which is not visible; the lower part of the scabbard is heart-shaped. The king's right arm is raised; two fingers are extended. The horse moves to the left and is saddled. The saddle has small pommel with a bent end, and a raised cantle. The horsecloth is rectangular



Fig. 3. Dish with representations of a king on a horse and two warriors.
a – front; b – drawing of the composition in the lower part; c – inscription on the back.

with rounded edges. The bridle rests on horse's neck; the breastplate is decorated with pendant-bells. The horse's tail is tied with a ribbon; a brow-band and bit with round cheekpieces are represented on the head.

In front of the king, a bearded warrior stands, with his headwear looking like a tripartite hat or crown. He has long hair with a curl at the end, like the king. His facial features are also rendered as a stylized T-shaped elevation. The warrior is dressed in a long caftan, ornamented in the same way as the caftan of the king with the pattern of circles; a torque or round collar is shown on his neck; a belt is at his waist, and high boots are on his legs. In his right hand, the warrior holds a long staff, and in his left he holds a sword, the scabbard of which ends below with a heart-shaped figure.

Another warrior, wearing a helmet with conic top and a long aventail hiding his hair stands, behind the king's back. The facial features of this character, as of the others, are rendered as a T-shaped elevation. The warrior wears a long caftan (or caftan and wide pants) and high boots without ornamentation. In his left hand, he holds a small shield with a four-petaled rosette in the center and ornamentation of circles along the edge. In his right hand, the warrior holds a banner on a long shaft with points at the top and bottom. A rectangular panel with fluttering ribbons is below the upper point.

In the lower part of the dish, a pond with plants around the edges is represented. An aquatic monster with a fish-like muzzle and tail is shown in the water. Its ears and paws, which end with the head of a bird of prey with a

beak, are marked. The monster holds the tail of a fish in its mouth (Fig. 3, b).

On the reverse side of the item, an inscription in Arabic, in Kufic script, is engraved: “four hundred and ninety” (Fig. 3, c). According to A.D. Pritula, who translated the inscription, this most likely means the date in Hijri, corresponding to 1096/1097 AD*, which is quite consistent with the forms of the letters.

Parallels and attribution. No parallels to the entire composition on the dish are known. One can find correspondences only to its individual elements on the items of toreutics of the Sasanian time. The king's clothing is clearly depicted according to the Sasanian canons. The crown is stylized after the Sasanian examples of the time of King Peroz (Trever, Lukonin, 1987: Fig. 17 (8)), Khosrow II, and Bahram (Ibid.: Fig. 18 (9); 27 (13)). The wings that adorn the top of the crown were borrowed from the examples of the Peroz period; the stepped figures on the top of the crown were adopted from other periods. A baldric decorated with round plates is shown on the caftans on the images of all these shahs; Bahram has a round torque on his neck (Ibid.). A sword with a pommel in the form of a heart-shaped figure was depicted on dishes with hunting scenes of the Sasanian kings, starting with Shapur III (Ibid.: Fig. 11 (4)). Banners similar to the one held by the warrior standing behind the king, as well as similar helmets with long aventails on warriors' heads,

*This opinion was expressed in a letter to the authors of the article.

are represented on the Anikovskoye and Nildino dishes (Darkevich, 1976: Pl. 24; Baulo, 2004: 128, fig. 1).

The raised hand of the king with folded fingers is noteworthy. Earlier, one of the authors of this article wrote about this feature on a dish from the Malaya Ob; in this manner, a speaking or even prophesying person was depicted (Baulo, 2000: 148). A similar image can be found on a Sasanian dish from the Baltimore Museum, where King Yazdegerd II is depicted with the queen (?), who sits with her left arm raised and her fingers folded (Lukonin, 1986: 176). One of the characters in a composition with noble Sogdians on a mural from Penjikent sits with a finger of his left hand raised, with which he points to his mouth (Frye, 1972: Fig. 135). The king on the dish described above and Azada on the Sasanian dish with the hunting scene of Bahram-e Gur are shown with the fingers of their right hands folded, but more often, both the female and male characters (the Nildino dish) have the fingers of their left hands folded. The raised fingers may indicate that the character is prophesying, but this explanation may hardly be applicable to Azada, the beloved of Bahram-e Gur, or to the warrior on the Nildino dish. Most likely, this gesture was supposed to draw attention to the speaker, and it probably did not matter whether one finger or two fingers extended together were raised. On an Early Byzantine dish of the 6th century with a composition of a dispute between Ajax and Odysseus over the weapon of Achilles, Athena is depicted with two folded fingers, while Odysseus is depicted with one raised finger, which points to the mouth, obviously calling for others to listen to him (Iskusstvo Vizantii..., 1977: 99, fig. 134).

Sasanian realia rendered with some simplifications* in the composition on a dish with figures of king and two warriors from Peregrebnoye, suggest that the item was made in some center of Eastern Iran or Central Asia no earlier than the 8th century, but more likely later, in the 9th–10th centuries. Such a conclusion was made by Marshak and Darkevich after analyzing the Anikovskoye dish, which is almost an exact copy of the Nildino dish (1974) and belongs to the same circle of silver-making centers.

It is extremely difficult to attribute the objects of toreutics, because with the exception of Sasanian dishes with the scenes of royal hunt, they cannot always (or can rarely) be unambiguously interpreted. It is helpful when more or less similar artifacts are available. For example, the dish with the ibex from Peregrebnoye can be considered a part of some set of things. It is more difficult with two other items: their place and time of manufacture can only be established with some degree of probability. Marshak wrote about this problem:

*This technique was also used for depicting Kings David and Solomon by the artisans who created a dish discovered on the Malaya Ob (Baulo, 2000).

“Silver dishware whose shape and ornamentation were closely related in different countries makes it possible to compare the contribution of these countries in the context of the same type of activities. Yet... the unit of comparison, along with the country, is also the artistic school, which moves from country to country while preserving its tradition even when taking different forms under local conditions” (1971: 90). In our case, precious dishware came from the trading Sogd, from the territories stretching from Semirechye to the Tang China. All this mass of items absorbed various influences and followed different models. In this case, the approximate dating of the Peregrebnoye dishes to late 8th–early 10th century is important for us, just as equally approximate identification of their manufacturing place as Sogd or Eastern Iran.

Dishes from Peregrebnoye in the context of silver Sogdian and East Iranian products of the 8th–10th centuries in the Lower Ob region

Until now, it had been believed that very few Sasanian and Sogdian objects of toreutics reached the region beyond the Urals. The catalog “Sokrovishcha Priobiya” (‘Treasures of the Ob Region’) mentions only the head of the monster (Simurgh), which Marshak considered a part of the throne of a Sogdian goddess and dated to the 8th century (Sokrovishcha Priobiya, 1996: 71). At the end of the 20th to the beginning of the 21st centuries, this list was supplemented with the Nildino dish, the dish from the Malaya Ob, and a rhyton in the form of a girl’s figurine (Gemuev, 1988; Baulo, 2000, 2004; Baulo, Marshak, 2001), as well as a Sasanian dish with the composition of bull hunting by King Yazdegerd I (Baulo, 2002).

Three silver dishes discovered in the area of the village of Peregrebnoye significantly enrich this list. These dishes could certainly have belonged both to archaeological medieval site and to the relatively late sacral complex (sanctuary or cultic barn) of the local population—the Ob Ugrians. This assumption follows from the religious and ritual practice described in the literature in sufficient detail, and recorded by scholars in the 20th–early 21st centuries (Chernetsov, 1947; Baulo, 2000, 2002, 2004; Baulo, Marshak, 2001; Baulo, Marshak, Fedorova, 2004).

Eastern silver vessels were included into religious and ritual practice usually on the basis of their shape (for sacrificial food), material (sacredness of silver), and quite recognizable figures or plots depicted on the front sides of the artifacts.

In the North, silver dishes were most often used for sacrificial purposes. In a number of rituals associated with worshipping of protecting ancestors of the clan, it was forbidden to eat sacrificial meat from wooden bowls.

For example, among the clan of the Winged Old Man (eagle), the meat of the sacrificial animals brought from the sanctuary to the village was allowed to be eaten only from metal dishes. According to V.N. Chernetsov, the ban on using any other utensils except those made of metal during the ritual could not have emerged in Siberia, where household and cultic utensils were made of wood and birch-bark. Such a ban could have been closely related to the appearance of imported metal dishes in the region; most likely, it was brought into the Ob region from those places where cultic metal dishware was used (Chernetsov, 1947: 120). Metal artifacts with animal representations (goat, deer) from Peregrebnoye may have been associated with the tradition of offering sacrificial food on a dish to a local deity.

A rider—the character appearing in the myths of the Ob Ugrians—was almost unambiguously equated with Mir-Susne-Hum ('The Man Looking Around the World'), the youngest son of the Supreme God Numi-Torum (Gemuev, 1990: 182–195). In the 19th–20th centuries, when Mir-Susne-Hum was summoned in a shamanic ritual, four silver saucers, often with images of the sun, were placed at the back wall of the house (Gondatti, 1888: 13, 19). According to Chernetsov, some large clans used silver dishes and plates for this purpose. The scholar was told about two ancient cultic centers where a similar practice was observed—Kaltas-syan-paul (the location where the goddess Kaltas dwelled, located in the immediate vicinity of Peregrebnoye) and Troitsk Yurts (the largest place of worshiping Mir-Susne-Hum) (Chernetsov, 1947: 121).

Thus, the area where Iranian and Sogdian silver items of the 8th–10th centuries (only a dish with a hunting scene of Yazdegerd I belongs to the earlier period, dating back to the 5th century) were discovered in the shores of the Severnaya Sosva and Synya Rivers near Berezovo. The finds described above are associated with this area, although the village of Peregrebnoye is located south of Berezovo. Nothing of the kind has yet been found in the territories to the east or to the north of Berezovo. It appears that the early Iranian/Central Asian imports were concentrated in this region. In fact, most of the early Islamic artistic metalwork has also been discovered in that area (Sokrovishcha Priobiya..., 2003: 14). Bronze Iranian bowls are widespread throughout the entire Lower and Middle Ob region, and have also been found on the Yamal and Gydan peninsulas, which can be explained by the resumption of trade routes "across the rocks" (through the Ural Mountains) in the late first millennium AD.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to Dr. A.D. Pritula, Senior Researcher at the Oriental Department of the State Hermitage

Museum, for his help in reading and dating the inscription on the silver bowl, and to M.O. Miller, the artist from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the SB RAS, for making a drawing of the dish for this publication.

The description and analysis of the items, the description of their parallels, and the overall attribution of the silver bowls were made by N.V. Fedorova, and were supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (Project No. 18-09-40011).

A.V. Baulo was the author of the scholarly concept of the study; he also formulated research objectives, collected sources, compiled descriptions of artifacts, and identified ethnographic parallels. This work was a part of Program XII.187.1 "Identification, Study, and Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of Siberia in the Information Society", Project No. 0329-2018-0007 "Study, Preservation, and Museumification of the Archaeological and Ethno-Cultural Heritage of Siberia", state registration No. AAAA-A17-117040510259-9.

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Received June 18, 2020.