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A Scythian Age Sword from the Forest-Steppe Altai*

In 2008, a long iron sword dating to the Scythian Age was found near Klyuchi village, northern Altai. It has a kidney-shaped guard, and a pommel sculptured as two griffin-heads and decorated with gold. The grip is braided with gold wire. The archaic designs of the guard and the grip, as well as the zoomorphic pommel, suggest that the sword is no later than the 6th–early 5th centuries BC. The lifelike way of rendering griffin-heads evidently originated somewhat earlier in the east of the Scythian world than in the west, where imitations of them with claw-shaped pommels circulated from the 5th–4th centuries BC onward. A large series of Scythian Age swords and daggers, found accidentally, comes from the forest-steppe Altai. Many of them have broken or bent blades, implying that they had ritual functions. Three more long iron swords dating to the early Scythian Age were found in the south of the Ob-Irtysh watershed. Because prestigious weapons of that type are more numerous in those regions than elsewhere, they probably originated in an area that included the northern Altai as its easternmost part.

Keywords: Swords, Scythian Age, pommel, guard, griffin.

In summer 2008, a local citizen of the village of Klyuchi, Tyumentsevsky District of the Altai Territory, found a long iron sword of the early Scythian Age that was added to the collection of similar artifacts from the Ob-Irtysh watershed (Fig. 1). Klyuchi is situated in the easternmost part of the area where swords of this sort have occurred. This new find makes it possible to re-address the questions of the distribution and dating of such artifacts.

In summer 2009, we visited the place of discovery of the sword; it was a ploughed field 2 km northeast

of Klyuchi, at the border between the Tyumentsevsky and Kamensky districts of the Altai Territory. The finder pointed to an approximate place of discovery of 100 × 200 m in size. This area is located at the northern toe of the watershed separating the Medvedka River from the wide valley (with depressions from fresh and salt water lakes) of an ancient flow. 200 m north of this place, there passes the motorway connecting Tyumentsevo and Kamen-na-Obi and adjoining the Kulunda irrigation channel. It is likely that in the late 20th century, this arable field was often levelled by bulldozers to establish mechanical irrigation systems. 12 km to the southwest, in similar environmental conditions, clusters of burial mounds of Gryaznovo-1–4 are located where the early Iron Age and medieval mounds were excavated (Mogilnikov et al., 1980). Thus, the possibility cannot be ruled out that there were burial mounds in this area that have not survived to the present day.

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Fig. 1. Swords with kidney- and heart-shaped guards from the Altai Territory.

1, 2 – Klyuchi village, Tyumentsevsky District; 3 – Novoobinka village, Petropavlovsky District; 4 – Gorkovskoye village, Shipunovsky District.
1–3 – iron, gold; 4 – iron.

The place of discovery of the sword presents a plain area with a slight slope towards the north. To the east and west, there are two dry spring beds joining Lake Gorkoye 500 m northwards. That is why it is impossible to associate the find with any particular archaeological context.

The Klyuchi sword is made of iron. Its grip is braided with gold wire and coated with gold leaf. The double-edged blade is narrowed towards the tip; the end is broken off. The preserved part of the sword is 86 cm long. The blade is 6.4 cm wide close to the guard, and 5.3 cm at the broken tip. The blade has a flat, rhomboid cross-section with a maximum thickness of 0.6 mm (Fig. 1, 1, 2).

The sword was found with a bent blade that was subsequently straightened by the finder. The sword does not demonstrate any of the scratches or splits that are characteristic of objects recovered from ploughed fields. Oxidation at the place of breakage suggests that the blade was broken in antiquity. Signs of damage in the blade's bending area show a pack of exfoliated plates (Fig. 2, 1). It looks as if the blade was made of at least three plates that were apparently badly welded.

The sword has a wide kidney-shaped guard (Fig. 3). The guard was made of two separate plates: a flat plate, and a plate with a complex segment-shaped cross-section. A slot for adjusting the guard to the grip was made in the middle of the convex side of the guard. Upon setting the guard and forged welding the plates, a clearance was formed between the end of the slot and the grip (Fig. 4, 1).

The grip is threefold and is braided with gold wire of angular cross-section, the wire edge being on the exterior surface (see Fig. 3). The braided wire is partially missing. Some wire portion was removed by the finder.

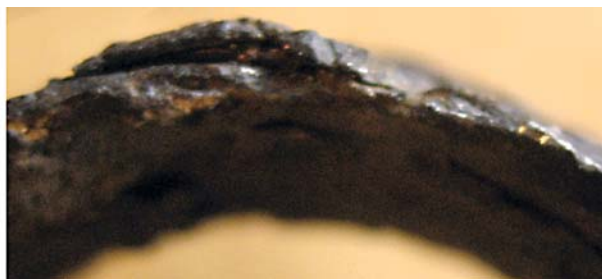
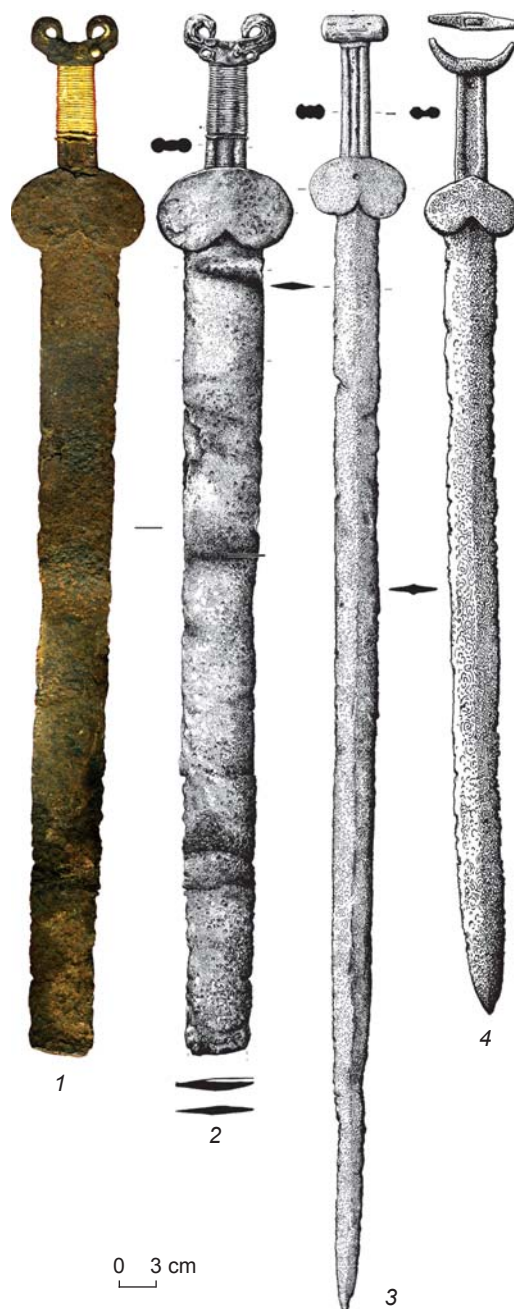


Fig. 2. Damage-signs on blades (packs of exfoliated plates) of Klyuchi (1) and Novoobinka (2) swords.

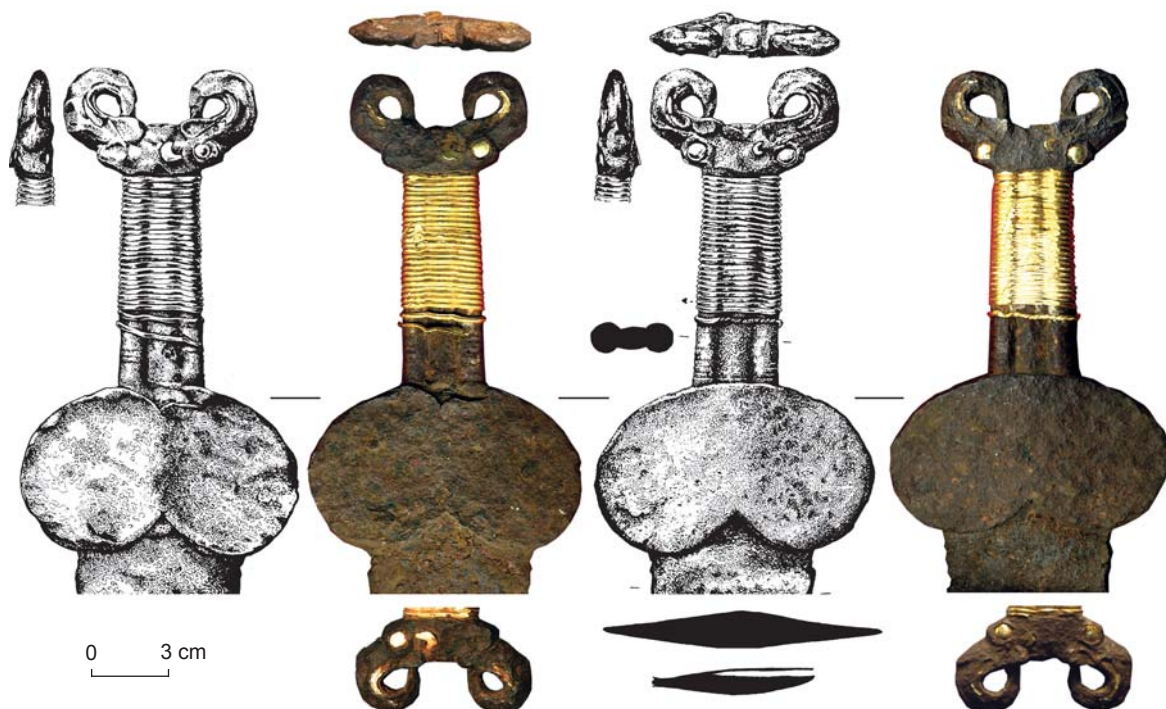


Fig. 3. Grip of the Klyuchi sword. Iron, gold.



1



2



3

Fig. 4. Forge-welds adjusting guard to grip on Klyuchi (1, 2) and Novoobinka (3) swords.

The pommel was sculptured as two griffin-heads facing opposite ways. The griffin's image shows a coiled beak with a cere, a large round eye, and an "ear" that represents a traditional feature of images of fantastic predatory birds in the Scytho-Siberian art. The griffins' eyes, "ears", and beaks were coated with gold leaf (see Fig. 3). Some portions of gold leaf are missing, and some parts of the pommel show signs of oxidization. The pommel was manufactured as a separate piece and hafted onto the rod-like projection of the grip with a sub-rectangular cross-section.

Despite the fact that long swords with kidney- and heart-shaped guards are rare, three similar objects have been found in the southern part of the Ob-Irtysh watershed: in the vicinity of the villages of Novoobinka, Petropavlovsky District of the Altai Territory (Ivanov, Mednikova, 1982; Mogilnikov, 1997: 39–40, fig. 33, 5), Gorkovskoye, Shipunovsky District of the Altai Territory (Kiryushin, Ivanov, Borodayev, 1995: 99–100, fig. 1, 1; Mogilnikov, 1997: 45, fig. 39, 1), and Zevakino in the East-Kazakhstan Region, the Republic of Kazakhstan (incidental finds) (Mogilnikov, 1997: 41).

(see Fig. 1, 2, 3; 5). These swords share common features with the Klyuchi sword in the shaping of guards and grips, and also in the techniques of blade-manufacture and attachment of the elements to the grip. The closest similarity is shown by the Novoobinka sword: its cutting edge was also made from a pack of plates, as evidenced by its exfoliated blade (see Fig. 2, 2). The guard is made of two plates, one of which has an elaborated slot on the interior surface, as on the Klyuchi sword (see Fig. 4, 3). In general, the design of the guards and grips is similar, yet the pommels vary in shape: the Novoobinka sword has a bar-shaped pommel, the Gorkovskoye sword has a crescent-shaped pommel, the Zevakino sword has a figured pommel with images of animal-heads showing open-mouthed bare teeth, with the general outline close to bar-shaped (see Fig. 5).

Noteworthy are the archaic features in the design of swords' grips from the Ob-Irtysh watershed: kidney- or heart-shaped guard, three-fold grip, and presence of loops or orifices for sword-knot (see Fig. 5, 1, 2). Such features were typical of the period of the 7th–early 5th century BC (Smirnov, 1961: 12, 16; Chernenko, 1980: 12–13; Denisov, Myshkin, 2008: 67, 68; Skripkin, 2007: 44–45). Comparatively few long swords with kidney- or heart-shaped guard and three-fold grip have been reported from quite a vast territory: two swords have been found in Saka burials of Tagisken cemetery in the Aral Sea region (Itina, Yablonsky, 1997: Fig. 44, 5; 55, 9); several swords have been reported from the Trans-Urals and from the Volga region (Smirnov, 1961: 23; Gorbunov, Ismagilov, 1976: 235–236, fig. 1, 2; Skripkin, 2007: 44–45, fig. 1, 7; 2, 12; Denisov, Myshkin, 2008: Fig. 2, 2); two, in the Scythian forest-steppe zone (Grishintsy and Chuguev settlements) (Ilyinskaya, 1968: 88–89, pl. I, 1; Ginters, 1928: 42, Taf. 19, f; Smirnov, 1961: 23); two more, in Transcaucasia (Karmir-Blur) and Central Anatolia (Imirler) (Ünal, 1982: Abb. 1, 1; Terenozhkin, 1975: 28, fig. 20; Ivanchik, 2001: 42, 59, 60, fig. 19, 1). Long swords from the well-dated assemblages have been attributed to the 7th century BC (Imirler, Karmir-Blur) (Ünal, 1982: 81; Terenozhkin, 1975: 28; Ivanchik, 2001: 42, 59, 60); to the 7th–6th century BC (Tagisken, mound 58); and to the 6th–early 5th century BC (Tagisken, mound 53) (Itina, Yablonsky, 1997: 67–69).

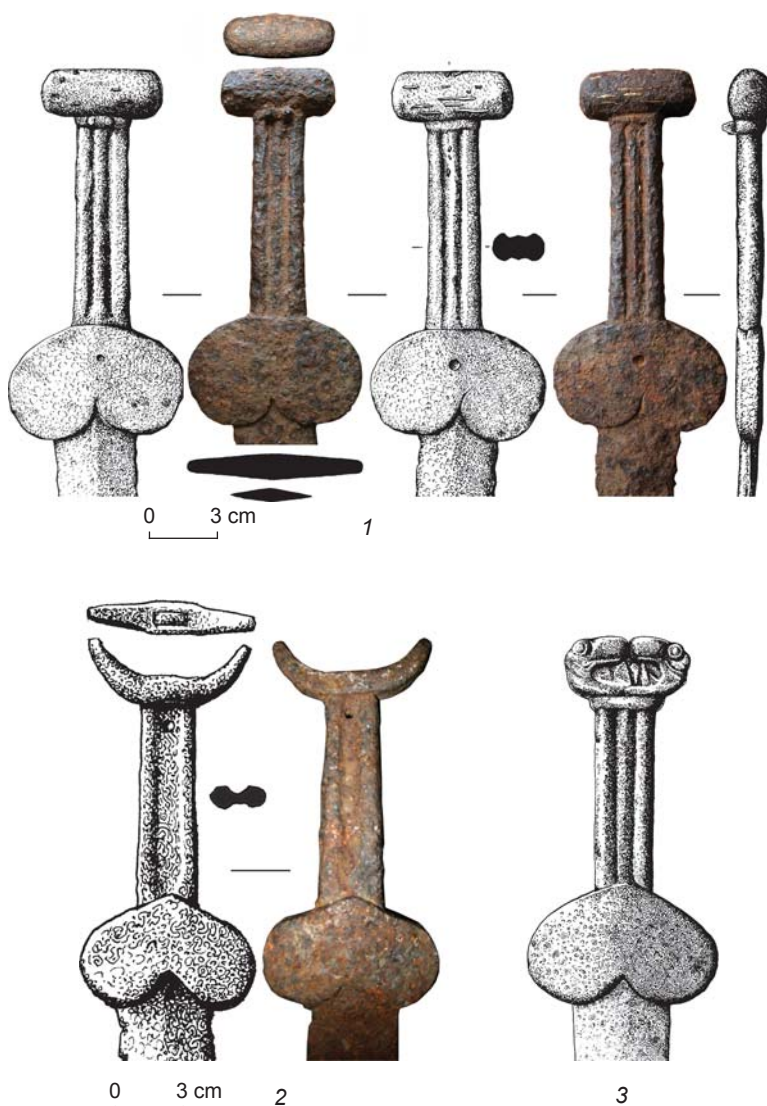


Fig. 5. Grips of iron swords.

1 – Novoobinka village, Petropavlovsky District, Altai Territory; 2 – Gorkovskoye village, Shipunovsky District, Altai Territory; 3 – Zevakino, East-Kazakhstan Region, the Republic of Kazakhstan (drawing from a photograph).

The Ob-Irtysh series of four long swords (relating to the early Scythian Age) is comparatively large and testifies that this region represents the easternmost part of the territory where such swords were generally used. These swords demonstrate archaic features, in contrast to the swords for the western parts of Eurasia steppes.

It should be noted that the southern part of the Ob-Irtysh watershed belongs to the area that yielded a large series of the Scythian bladed weapons represented mostly by accidental finds (Ivanov, 1987: 15–17; Mogilnikov, 1997: 36). Researchers believe that this is connected with the traditions of using swords and daggers for ritual purposes and with existence of cult places (Borodovsky, Larichev, 2001: 226; Pletneva, Mets, 1999: 145; Vasiliev,

Obydenov, 1994: 98). Perhaps this is also attested by the damage-signs on these objects. The blades of all Scythian long swords from the Altai forest steppe (Klyuchi, Novoobinka, Gorkovskoye) were bent in ancient times, which suggests some ritual activities.

A wide range of analogs is available for the zoomorphic pommel of the Klyuchi sword. The closest is the pommel of the iron dagger from Barnaul Region, representing two opposing griffin-heads (Mogilnikov, 1997: 42, fig. 36, 2). The easternmost analog is the pommel of the bronze dagger discovered in Northern China in the burial at Beixinbao cemetery in Hebei Province (Fig. 6, 4). The “ge” pick found in this burial allowed the dagger to be dated to the 5th–early 4th century BC (Jung Sok Bae, 1998: 25, fig. 1, 5).

Pommels with stylized images of griffin-heads, which are usually designated as “claw-shaped”, are most typical for the regions west of Southern Siberia (Ismagilov, Skarbovenko, 1977: 90; Denisov, Myshkin, 2008: 65). Sword and dagger pommels from Bashkiria (Vasiliev, Obydenov, 1994: 96, fig. 1, 3) and Solovka in Orenburg Region (Smirnov, 1961: 39–40, fig. 4, 1) are the closest analogs in the design of griffin-heads to the Ob-Irtysh objects (Fig. 6, 5). Some researchers believe that the pommels showing lifelike images of griffin-heads represent the Siberian tradition (Ibid.: 20; Vasiliev, 2001: 41). In general, swords and daggers with claw-shaped pommels were widespread in the western part of the Scythian realm. The majority of researchers attribute them to the 5th–4th century BC (Ismagilov, Skarbovenko, 1977: 90; Maksimov, Polesskikh, 1971: 241–242; Smirnov, 1961: 21; Vasiliev, Obydenov, 1994: 96; Milyukova, 1964: 55–56, pl. 20, 8–11; Ilyinskaya,

1968: 90, pl. VII, 18; XV, 1). Notably, only a few such objects have been recorded in Siberia. For instance, a long iron sword with a bronze grip was found in Yakutia and represents the northeasternmost find of this sort. The fact that this sword was found in such a distant place from the dispersal area of Scythian cultures arouses considerable interest (Okladnikov, 1955: 190–191, fig. 64, 2).

The claw-shaped pommels were interpreted as stylized images of griffin-heads by A.A. Bobrinsky, A.A. Miller, V.A. Grakov, and V.A. Ilyinskaya (Merpert, 1948: 76; Ilyinskaya 1968: 90). N.Y. Merpert (1948: 77–78) proposed the “claw-shaped” interpretation of this pommel type. This interpretation has been accepted by the majority of researchers nowadays (Denisov, Myshkin, 2008: 65). Merpert based his interpretation on the longitudinal division of the “antennas” resembling the claw structure, and on the absence of more “realistic” prototypes of the stylized images where griffin-heads could be clearly seen (1948: 75–76). The design of the Klyuchi pommel confutes these arguments in favor of interpretation of such stylized images exactly as “claw-shaped” and not “griffin-headed”.

Apparently, the “classical” representation of the eared griffin-head suggests the earlier origin of the sword as compared to the specimens decorated with stylized images. Substantially, this representation can be considered a prototype of subsequent images that were transformed into “antenna-shaped”, “claw-shaped”, and “claw-shaped” with a guard type of pommel. The indication of an eye and a loop-shaped beak-claw on claw-shaped pommels attests to the fact that such pommels probably were the stylized derivatives of “griffin-headed” ones. The wrinkles (longitudinal folds) on the “antenna”-

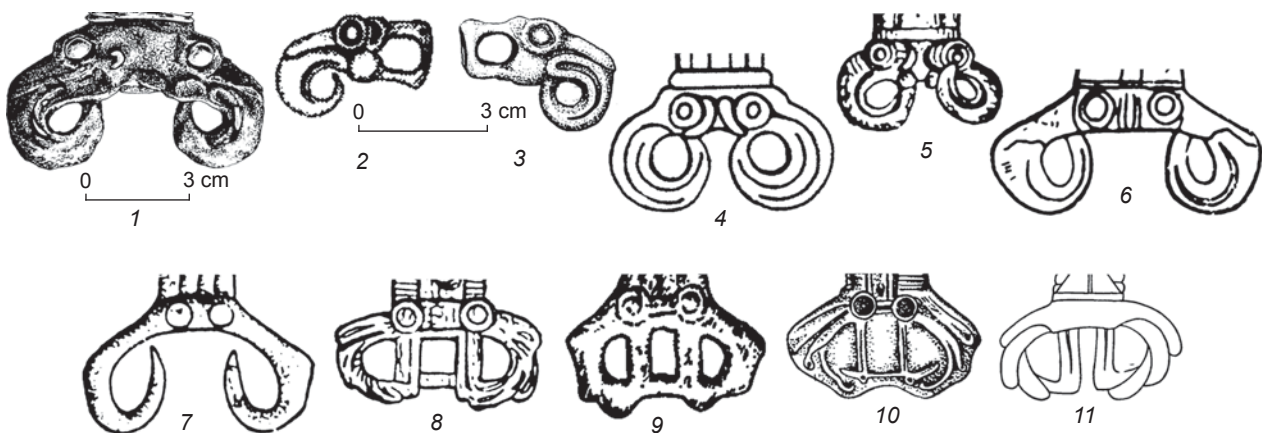


Fig. 6. Sword-pommels and horse-trappings of the Scythian Age, showing griffin-head images, and their stylized variants. 1 – Klyuchi village, Altai Territory; 2 – Kyryk-Oba II, Southern Transurals (after: (Gutsalov, 2007: Fig. 12, III, 8)); 3 – Obskiye Plesy II, Altai Territory (after: (Vedyanin, Kungurov, 1996: Fig. 16, 9)); 4 – Beixinbao, Hebei Province (after: (Jung Sok Bae, 1998: Fig. 1, 5)); 5 – Solovka, Orenburg Region (after: (Smirnov, 1961: Fig. 4, 1)); 6 – Grishchintsy, Cherkassy Region (after: (Milyukova, 1964: Pl. 20, 10)); 7 – Ekaterinoslav Governorate (after: (Ibid.)); 8 – Novaya Bogdanovka, Orenburg Region (after: (Denisov, Myshkin, 2008: Fig. 4, 6)); 9 – Staikin Verkh, the Sula River basin (after: (Ilyinskaya, 1968: Pl. VII, 18)); 10 – Aksyutintsy, Sumy Region (after: (Ibid.: Pl. XV, 1)); 11 – Kirensk on the Lena River, Yakutia (after: (Okladnikov, 1955: Fig. 64, 2)).

beak most likely imitate the cere feature that is typical of the “classical” images of beaks of predatory birds and griffins (Fig. 6). It should be noted that all the above-mentioned analogs to the image on the Klyuchi sword pommel already show stylized features: the “ear” is missing, cere is shown through a dimple. Recognizable are only the eye and the beak (Fig. 6, 4–6).

The Klyuchi sword's pommel shows all features typical of the iconography of an eared griffin-head: a large round eye, brackets behind it, arched “ears”, and a coiled beak with an emphasized cere (Fig. 6, 1). This representation has a great number of analogs among the objects made in the Scytho-Siberian animal style from sites of southern Siberia (Chlenova, 1967: Pl. 26; Shulga, 2002: 186–189). For instance, a clear resemblance was noted to the iconography of griffin-heads on bronze belt-clips from the cemeteries of Obskiye Plesy II (Barnaul region of the Ob) and Kyryk-Oba II (Southern Transurals) (Fig. 6, 2, 3) and also on butterfly-shaped plaques from the cemetery of Firsovo XIV (Vedyanin, Kungurov, 1996: Fig. 16, 3, 9; Gutsalov, 2007: Fig. 12, 8; Frolov, 2008: Fig. 133, 3; 186, 1, 5).

The archaic design of the guard and the grip, and also the pommel in the form of griffin-heads, suggest that the sword is no later than the 6th–early 5th centuries BC. The lifelike way of rendering griffin-heads may suggest that such swords originated in the east of the Scythian world somewhat earlier than in the west, where their imitations with stylized pommels circulated from the 5th–4th centuries BC onward.

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