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## Decorated Birch-Bark Artifacts from the Ust-Polui Sanctuary (100 BC to 100 AD)

*Birch-bark items from the Ust-Polui sanctuary are unusually well preserved, thanks to permafrost, and are richly decorated. We list the archaeological sites with birch-bark artifacts, decorated and otherwise, in the Lower Ob basin, spanning the period from the Chalcolithic to the Late Middle Ages. At Ust-Polui, the vast majority of such artifacts were found during the latest excavations, conducted by A.V. Gusev. Most were found in a ditch dug across the site. Special reference is made to their cut and decoration technique. Some high-quality specimens are intentionally damaged, possibly by way of sacrifice. The evolution of the northwestern Siberian decorative tradition is discussed.*

**Keywords:** Lower Ob, Yamal, Ust-Polui, birch-bark artifacts, permafrost.

### Introduction

Birch-bark artifacts are among the rarest items in archaeological collections. In the modern Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO), they were found at some thoroughly excavated sites of various epochs, where the presence of permafrost allows items made of organic materials to persist for several thousand years. These sites include the Chalcolithic settlement of Gorny Samotnel-1 (Tupakhina, 2013: 107), the Ust-Polui site (ancient sanctuary) belonging to the Early Iron Age (Gusev, Fedorova, 2012: 22), and also the so-called aboriginal forts, such as Voykar (Fedorova, 2006: 16), Polui (Kardash, 2013: 245–253), and Nadym (Kardash, 2009: 241–248). The collections from the Sherkaly-1/2 fortified settlement (Parkhimovich, 1998) and the Saygatinsky III burial ground (Ugorskoye naslediye, 1994: 76) are the most remarkable in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra. Thus, birch-bark artifacts in archaeological collections can be referred to as a new, understudied phenomenon.

This paper presents the results of studying decorated birch-bark artifacts from the Ust-Polui archaeological site. This article was preceded by a number of preliminary publications regarding various issues involved in studying the decorated birch-bark (Mogritskaya, 2010, 2011, 2014; Mogritskaya, Pitukhin, 2013).

### Study materials

The Ust-Polui is situated in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, within the Salekhard city limits, at the latitude of the Arctic Circle. The study involves collections from excavations conducted before 2014. In total, over the years of the study of the site, 15 conventionally intact (reconstructable) decorated birch-bark items in the form of small containers, and more than 50 fragments decorated using various techniques, have been discovered. Photo-recording, restoration, and drawing of the ornamented specimens were conducted during 2010–2013. Data on their attribution and number

were constantly changing, owing to the fact that an artifact could have been wrongly interpreted before restoration. It was not possible to identify the total number of decorated birch-bark artifacts until 2014.

The Ust-Polui sanctuary is dated to the period from 100 BC to 100 AD (Shiyatov et al., 2000: 55). It may be called unique, since no such large-scale ritual places pertaining to the Early Iron Age and also almost completely studied by stationary excavations have been known so far. Over the years of excavation, the cultural layer of this site has demonstrated very high saturation with various artifacts. In 2010, for the first time, finds composed of organic materials, including birch-bark items, became abundant, owing to the discovery of a deep ditch filled with frost-bound organic remains (Gusev, Fedorova, 2012: 24). Since its discovery in 1932, the site has been studied by many researchers, including V.S. Adrianov, A.F. Palashenkov, V.N. Chernetsov, V.I. Moshinskaya, S.G. Parkhimovich, V.M. Morozov, N.V. Fedorova, and A.V. Gusev (Mazurin, 2012: 13). Collections from the excavations by Parkhimovich, Fedorova, and Gusev contained ornamented birch-bark items.

The cultural layer's conditions in the central part of the site area did not contribute to the preservation of birch-bark items; however, despite this fact, remains of birch-bark coatings of timber decks and pit-linings were found here; in 2006, a small square birch-bark undecorated box, containing a bone ball, was added to these finds (Gusev, Fedorova, 2012: 24).

Almost all other artifacts were found in the ditch, a part of which was excavated as early as 1995. At that time, intact birch-bark items and their fragments were discovered. The ditch opened in 2010 had a depth of 2.5 m from the present-day surface, and 1.9 m from the ancient one. The bridge crossing the ditch was uncovered

at the same time. It was here, in the immediate vicinity of the bridge, that the bulk of the birch-bark items were found. The 2011–2012 excavation areas were established with due regard to the direction of the ditch; however, the tendency to reduction in the number of objects made of organic materials is obvious (Ibid.).

### Typology of birch-bark items and their decoration

The majority of decorated birch-bark items found at the site are remains of containers. The ornithomorphic image cut from a birch-bark layer is a special case (Fig. 1). The morphological typology of birch-bark artifacts from Ust-Polui has been created on the basis of the most abundant collection from the excavations of 2010 (Mogritskaya, 2011: 363). According to the cutting patterns of the birch-bark layers, four types of container have been distinguished. Decorated items are encountered among artifacts of all types.

*Type 1.* There is only one ornamented container. Each item was made from a rectangular birch-bark sheet, the ends of which were bent at the corners in the forms of triangles, put along the short sides of the box, and held together using a rod or a cedar root threaded through pairs of holes. Usually, such a container was made of a rough sheet of birch-bark in such a way that the outer bark-layer formed the external side of the item. Birch-bark containers of this type are most numerous. In most cases, they are not decorated (Fig. 2, 3).

*Type 2.* Eight ornamented artifacts of this type have been discovered. A birch-bark sheet with a complex cutting pattern was used as a blank: a rectangular base with slightly concave short sides and semi-circles adjoining the long sides. The shape was created from a



Fig. 1. Ornithomorphic image cut from a birch-bark sheet.

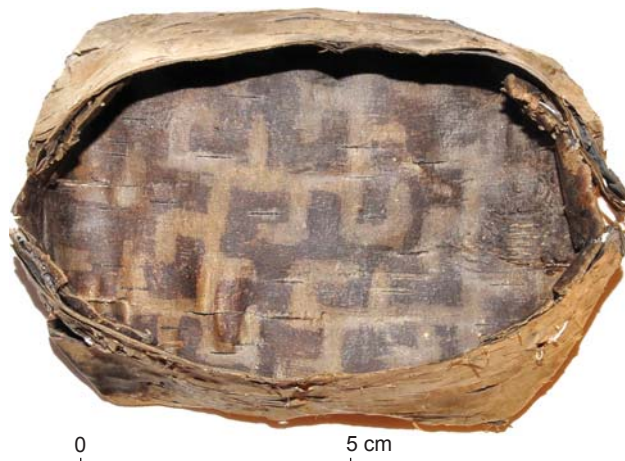


Fig. 2. Decorated birch-bark container of type 1.

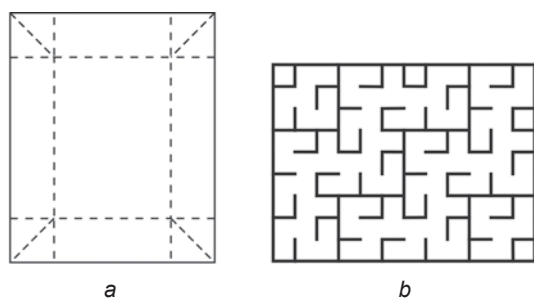


Fig. 3. Cutting pattern for containers of type 1 (a), and ornamental pattern of the item (b) represented in Fig. 2.



Fig. 4. Decorated container of type 2.

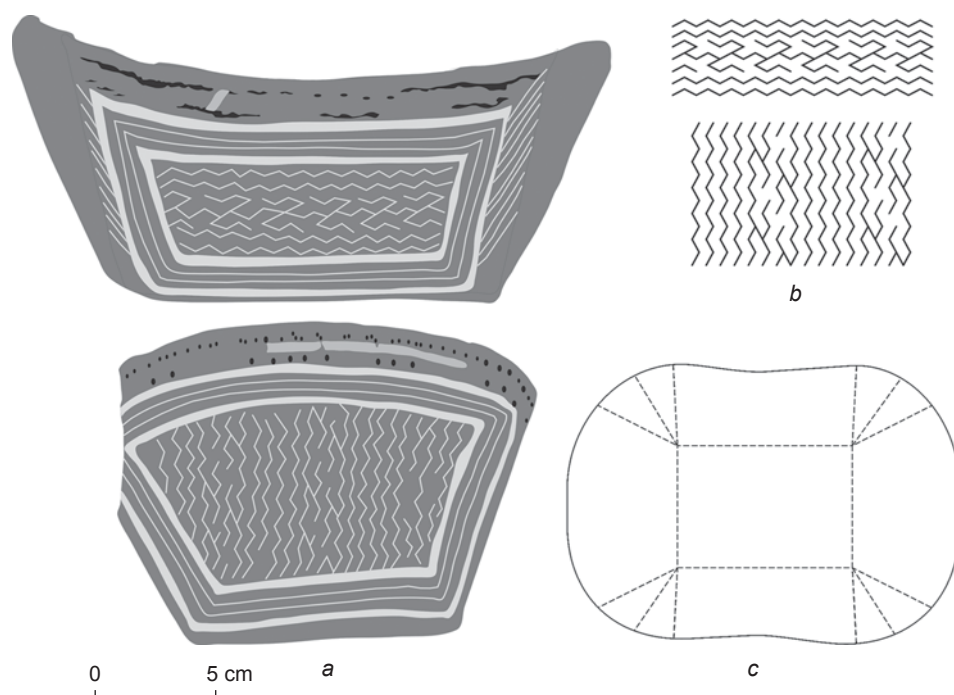


Fig. 5. Drawing of ornament (a) and ornamental patterns of the item (b) represented in Fig. 4, a cutting pattern for containers of type 2 (c).

double layer as follows: the ends of the inner layer, with a dark side facing out, were bent at the corners in the forms of triangles and put along the long sides; while the outer layer was slashed, and its ends were bent upwards, thus forming a container with a widened mouth and a relatively rectangular bottom. One or two rods were inserted along the top edge, and the entire construction was sewn around with a double or single seam made of cedar-roots or grass (Fig. 4, 5).

*Type 3.* This type is represented by a single specimen. The container is cut from several birch-bark layers. The base is a rectangular sheet with V-openings along the short sides. Additionally, parts of trapezoidal shape were cut out. The container was created by sewing together the

base along the openings, and applying additional parts along the lateral sides (Fig. 6, 7).

*Type 4.* Four decorated artifacts of this type have been discovered. Each container is made in the form of a cylinder, and consists of three parts: a round bottom, a round cover, and a lateral side from a birch-bark band. The diameters of the items and the heights of their walls vary considerably (Fig. 8, 9).

The ornamental patterns are represented by meanders in the forms of borders or nets in various arrangements. Sometimes, the variability of ornaments is achieved by way of reducing or increasing the segments. There are some examples of complex closed compositions including images of birds and animals at their centers framed by





Fig. 6. Decorated container of type 3.

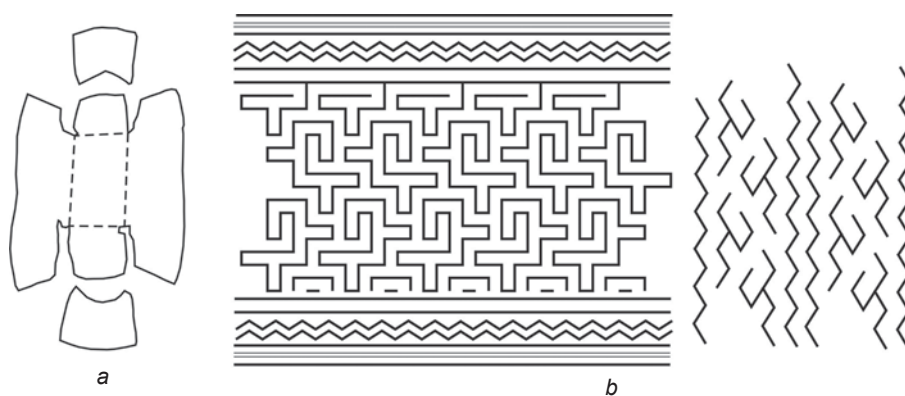


Fig. 7. Cutting pattern for containers of type 3 (a), and ornamental patterns of the item (b) represented in Fig. 6.



Fig. 8. Decorated container of type 4.

geometric patterns. In some cases, the main structural element is a swastika. The majority of ornaments are inscribed each within a strict geometric net with various angles of inclination of guide-lines. Noteworthy is a precise marking of ornamental patterns, which reveals itself in parallelism of lines and observance of angles of inclination. This suggests the use of stencils for decoration. At the time of study, there are no finds with curvilinear motifs.

In the vast majority of cases, the technique of scraping against a dark background was used (see Fig. 6), while only in two cases, drawings were made by scratching (Fig. 10, 11), and in one case the drawing was pricked (Fig. 11). Also, in 2010, for the first time, birch-bark openwork bands with profiled edges were discovered

(Fig. 12), which were obviously used to decorate containers of the 2nd and 4th types.

The majority of containers were intentionally torn into several pieces, into some of which bones of animals, fur fragments, etc. were put. This suggests that the birch-bark items were purposefully made for some ceremonies and were subsequently destroyed. Such actions are described in detail in ethnographic studies (Kharyuchi, 2001: 133).

## Conclusions

The majority of researchers see the origins of modern ornaments of the northwestern Siberian peoples in the ornamentation of the Bronze Age cultures.

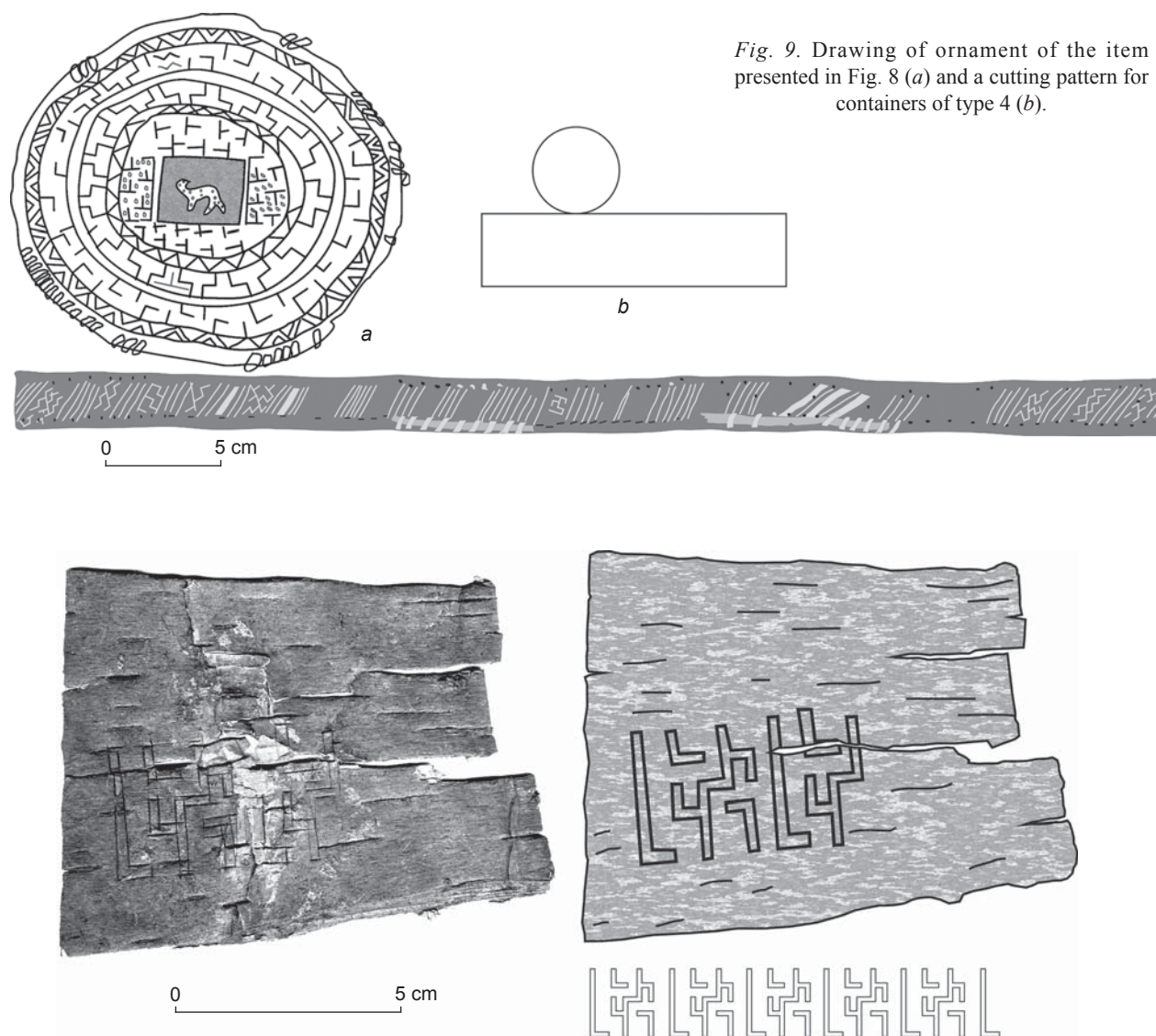


Fig. 9. Drawing of ornament of the item presented in Fig. 8 (a) and a cutting pattern for containers of type 4 (b).

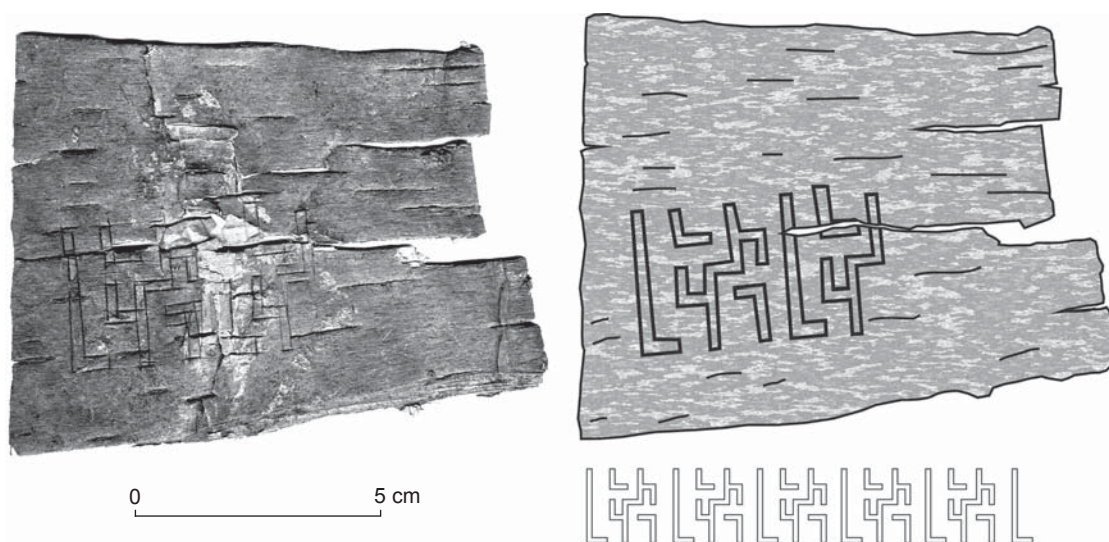


Fig. 10. A fragment of a birch-bark item with scratched-out ornament.



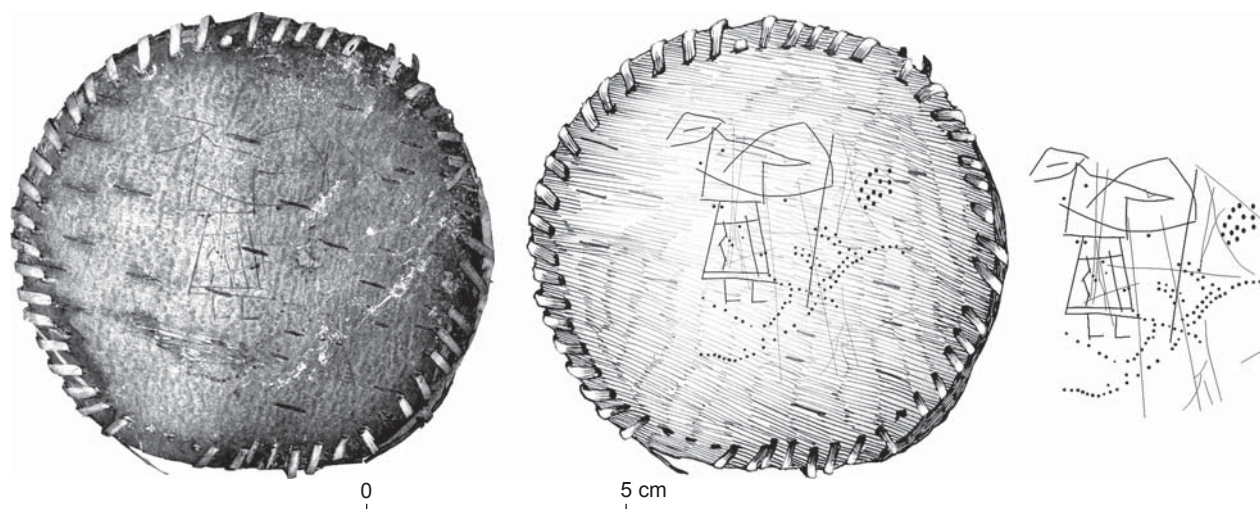


Fig. 11. A fragment of a birch-bark container of type 4 with scratched-out and pricked images.

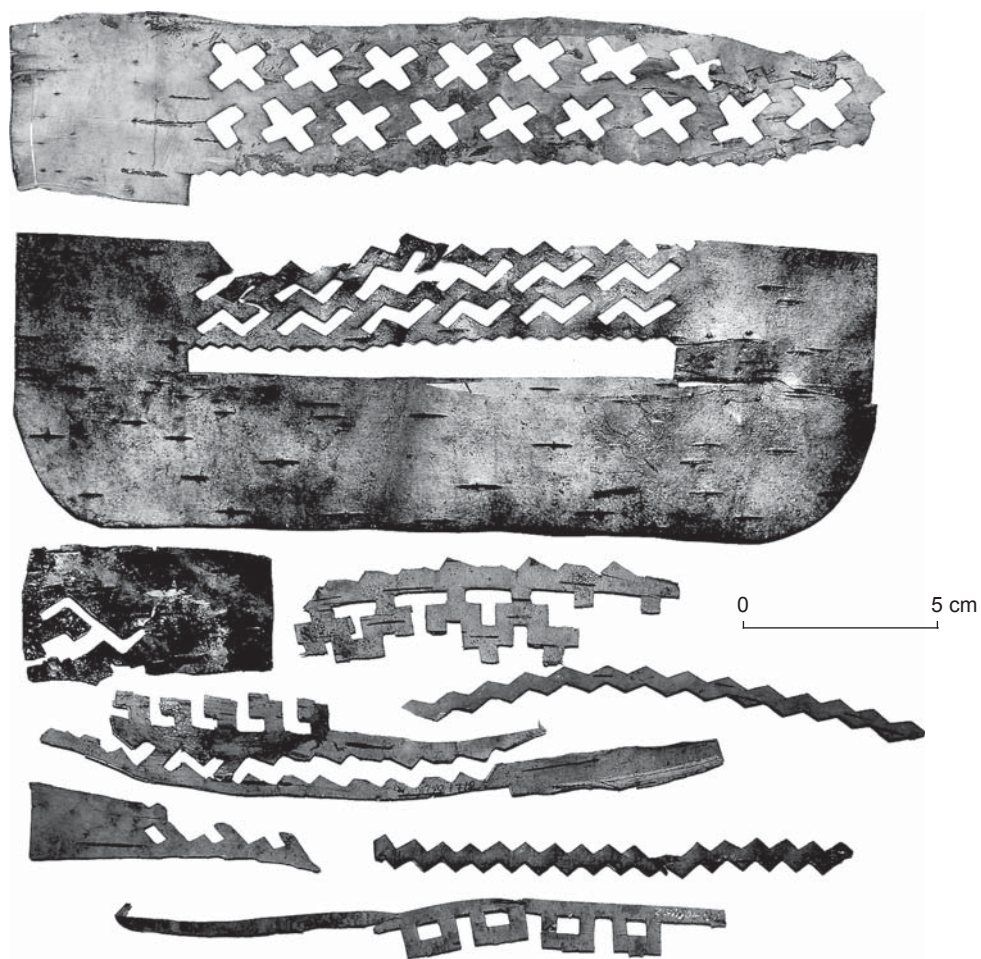


Fig. 12. Openwork and profiled birch-bark bands.

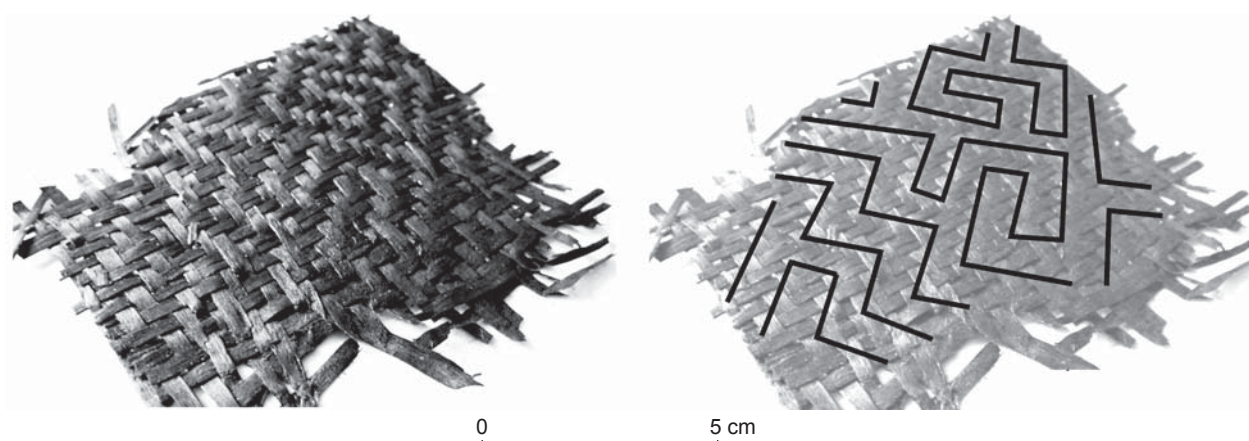


Fig. 13. Decorated grass mat.

No unambiguous opinion has been formed in this respect so far. V.N. Chernetsov came to the conclusion that the decorative tradition of steppe Andronovo-type cultures, having reached into the area of taiga tribes in the Bronze Age, formed the basis for development of the modern decorative system of the Khanty and Mansi. According to S.V. Ivanov, we may talk “not about ornamentation in general, but only about one ornamentation complex represented mainly by a series of border ornaments of special type” (see (Koksharov, Ermakova, 1992: 12)). At the same time, there is a point of view according to which the role of Andronovo-type groups of population in the formation of traditional ornamentation among the Middle and Lower Ob region peoples was very limited, while a crucial role is ascribed to the decorative traditions of the Atlym and Lozva cultures (Ibid.). Interesting also is the opinion that the meander motifs initially appeared on soft materials rather than on ceramics (Ryndina, 1995: 376). This appears to be logical, but has not found sufficient confirmation in the archaeological materials so far. This can be supported by such evidence as the grass mat found in Ust-Polui in 2010. Its complex plaiting is such that alternation of separate elements forms a meander (Fig. 13). Most probably, the pattern was also highlighted by color, since mats with elements painted red and black were found at the site. During preliminary study of this item, the colorant was not discovered; but subsequently, restorer S.V. Pitukhin managed to discern differently colored elements of the mat at a certain inclination and illumination. The colorant’s composition has not yet been determined.

Many birch-bark containers had widened mouths and subrectangular shapes. This makes it possible to compare them with clay boat-shaped vessels of the Bronze Age. Apparently, similar birch-bark vessels existed during the Chalcolithic and the Bronze Age; however, these have not survived to the present day.

The question arises of the birch-bark decoration’s continuity from the turn of the eras to the present

day. Comparison of Ust-Polui and Late Medieval motifs shows more differences than similarities. For example, large stylized images of animals as a center of composition appeared in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. This motif gained maximum momentum in the second half of this millennium, and is impressively represented on birch-bark artifacts discovered in the course of studying the “forts” of that period. Meanwhile, in the Ust-Polui ornamentation, images of animals are more realistic and small, and the centers of closed compositions are filled with net pattern. As for the similarities, meander band patterns that are extant even now have remained substantially unchanged (Syazi, 2005: 70). In addition, neither the shapes of items nor their manufacture and decoration techniques underwent major transformations.

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