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V.V. Bobrov¹⁻³ and L.Y. Bobrova¹¹Kemerovo State University,

Krasnaya 6, Kemerovo, 650043, Russia

E-mail: klae@kemsu.ru; chaika@kemsu.ru

²Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences,
Pr. Akademika Lavrentieva 17, Novosibirsk, 630090, Russia³Institute of Human Ecology, Federal Research Center of Coal and Coal Chemistry,
Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences,
Sovetsky pr. 18, Kemerovo, 650000, Russia

Newly Discovered Bronze Artifacts of the Scythian Period from Archekas Mountain, Kuznetsk Alatau*

The borderland between the West Siberian Plain and the Kuznetsk-Salair mountain region is a narrow strip of the Mariinsk forest-steppe, which was a transit and contact area between two ancient cultural centers: that of the Upper Ob and the Middle Yenisei. Archaeological finds from this area are especially interesting. One of the important geographic features of the Mariinsk forest-steppe is Archekas Mountain. About a dozen archaeological sites on this mountain date to the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. In October 2015, several bronze items were found there: a cauldron, four arrowheads, a “mirror”, a deer figurine, and a dagger, whose handle is decorated in the Scytho-Siberian style. All items are cast of tin bronze; a small amount of arsenic is also present in certain cases. This article describes the context and the location of the finds, the items, and their cultural affinities. Despite the generally Scythian appearance of all the artifacts and the wide distribution area of their parallels, it is shown that the assemblage belongs to the Tagar culture and, by Tagar standards, should date to 600–400 BC. However, the artifacts resemble those manufactured in the forest-steppe periphery and were probably custom-made for the Kulai people of the taiga zone. If so, they must belong to a later period, and fall within the 400–200 BC interval. The analysis of assemblages with cauldrons has allowed us to assume that the Archekas assemblage was ritual, associated with a sanctuary.

Keywords: Siberia, Early Iron Age, daggers, cauldrons, arrowheads, Tagar culture, Kulai culture, Scytho-Siberian animal style.

Introduction

The southeastern border zone of the world's largest plain, the West Siberian Plain, is a narrow forest-steppe belt, which separates it from the Kuznetsk-Salair mountain region of Southern Siberia. The present-day level of

archaeological knowledge of this territory makes it possible to conclude that the space bounded by the mountains of the Kuznetsk Alatau on the south and lowland taiga on the north were a transit zone in ancient times. In rare historical periods, large ethnic and cultural entities settled on the forest-steppe boundary. One of

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the examples is the Tagar culture, which existed in the so-called Achinsk-Mariinsk forest-steppe from the 6th century BC until the turn of the eras (Martynov, 1979: 3–4). However, more often this territory was a contact zone for various peoples belonging to two major centers of cultural development: one on the Upper Ob and the other on the Middle Yenisei (Bobrov, 1992: 6). The inhabitants of the northern taiga also took part in this interaction. Although archaeologically their contacts with the forest-steppe population are less expressed, we can theoretically assume that they played a significant role in the life of the taiga hunters and fishermen.

Given the historical context of the border zone, many issues related to the history of its preliterate period remain beyond our knowledge. Therefore, archaeological research and new findings in this area are of special interest for specialists in the field. Such finds include an assemblage of bronze objects found on Archekas Mountain in the Kemerovo Region not far from the town of Mariinsk.

Geographical context of the discovery

The small Archekas Ridge covers an area of about 50 km² and is located between the rivers Kiya and Yaya. These are the extreme northwestern spurs of the Kuznetsk Alatau bordering the West Siberian Plain. The height of the ridge is only 204 m above sea level. Archekas Mountain is located on the right bank of the Kiya and stretches for about 10 km along the river. From an orographic point of view, the mountain is an insignificant hill cut by deep ravines and rising above flat terrain. The ruggedness of the terrain, more pronounced on the western and southern slopes, decreases to the north and almost disappears on the eastern periphery. Despite the small area, there are several types of vegetation, including forests, meadows, and steppes. Two archaeological sites (the settlements of Archekas V and VI) are located on the southern and southeastern slopes of Archekas Mountain, overgrown with birch groves and bordered by floodplain lakes and shallow channels, one of which is the Kabadat stream. The general physiographical situation can be described as foothill taiga or the borderland between forest-steppe and foothill taiga zones.

Archaeological research on the Archekas Ridge

A considerable area of Archekas Mountain has been well studied from an archaeological point of view. Over the last half a century, seven sites concentrated along the winding bank of the river Kiya to the southeast of the town of Mariinsk (Fig. 1) have been discovered, which are from the Bronze Age to the Tashtyk period. The first studies

were carried out in the 1960s on the southwestern, western, and southern slopes of Archekas Mountain by the local ethnographer I.I. Baukhnik, who discovered a fortified settlement and three habitation sites (Archekas I–III, V). On the basis of pottery assemblages, Baukhnik dated these sites to the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. According to him, the sites were multilayered. The analysis of the materials allowed Baukhnik to identify the ornamental motifs typical of the forest zone and suggest the mutual influence of the forest and steppe cultures of Western Siberia (1970: 49, 52). Bronze celt axes with geometric ornamental pattern (Ibid.: Fig. 4, 1; Kovtun, Marochkin, 2011), objects of art, and an object of bone are of particular interest among the discovered artifacts. These objects were initially kept at the Mariinsk House of Pioneers, but were subsequently transferred (a part of them were lost) to the district museum of local history.

In 1971, A.M. Kulemzin excavated two burial mounds of the Scytho-Sarmatian period at the site of Archekas (discovered in 1967), 4 km south of Mariinsk, on the side of the western slopes of the mountain. Distinctive features of the burial ritual, especially structural features of the tombs, did not allow Kulemzin to determine their cultural attribution. According to Kulemzin, the similarity of some objects from the burials with Tagar objects may explain only their general Scythian nature. Most of the objects have parallels far beyond the forest-steppes of Southern Siberia (Kulemzin, 1979). Over thirty years later, a group of specialists dated this burial ground to the 4th–3rd centuries BC in their publication of the results of monitoring the archaeological heritage of Kemerovo Region, and attributed the burial ground to the Tagar culture (Bashtannik et al., 2011: 12).

In 1976, A.V. Tsirkin continued the studies of the fortified settlement of Archekas I discovered by Baukhnik. The site was located on a promontory of the western slopes 6.5 km southeast of the town of Mariinsk. The pits of dugout dwellings, household pits, and hearth stains have been revealed. Knives, fishhooks, bone arrowheads, polishers, borers, etc., over 400 pottery objects, and 2500 fragments of bones of domestic animals have been found in the cultural layer. The dishware was decorated with a “duck-like” or snake-like ornamental pattern, or with slanting crosses. On the basis of a cornelian bipyramidal hexagonal bead, Tsirkin dated the fortified settlement to the 2nd–1st centuries BC (1977: 251), while V.V. Bobrov dated the pottery assemblage with stamped ornamentation to the period of transition from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (1999). Currently, the site has been fully explored. In the same year of 1976, Tsirkin discovered the Archekas IV habitation site of the Late Bronze Age on the western slopes of the mountain 500 m to the north of the fortified settlement (1977: 252).

In 1997, the Kuzbass Archaeological Expedition of the Joint Laboratory of Archaeology and Ethnography

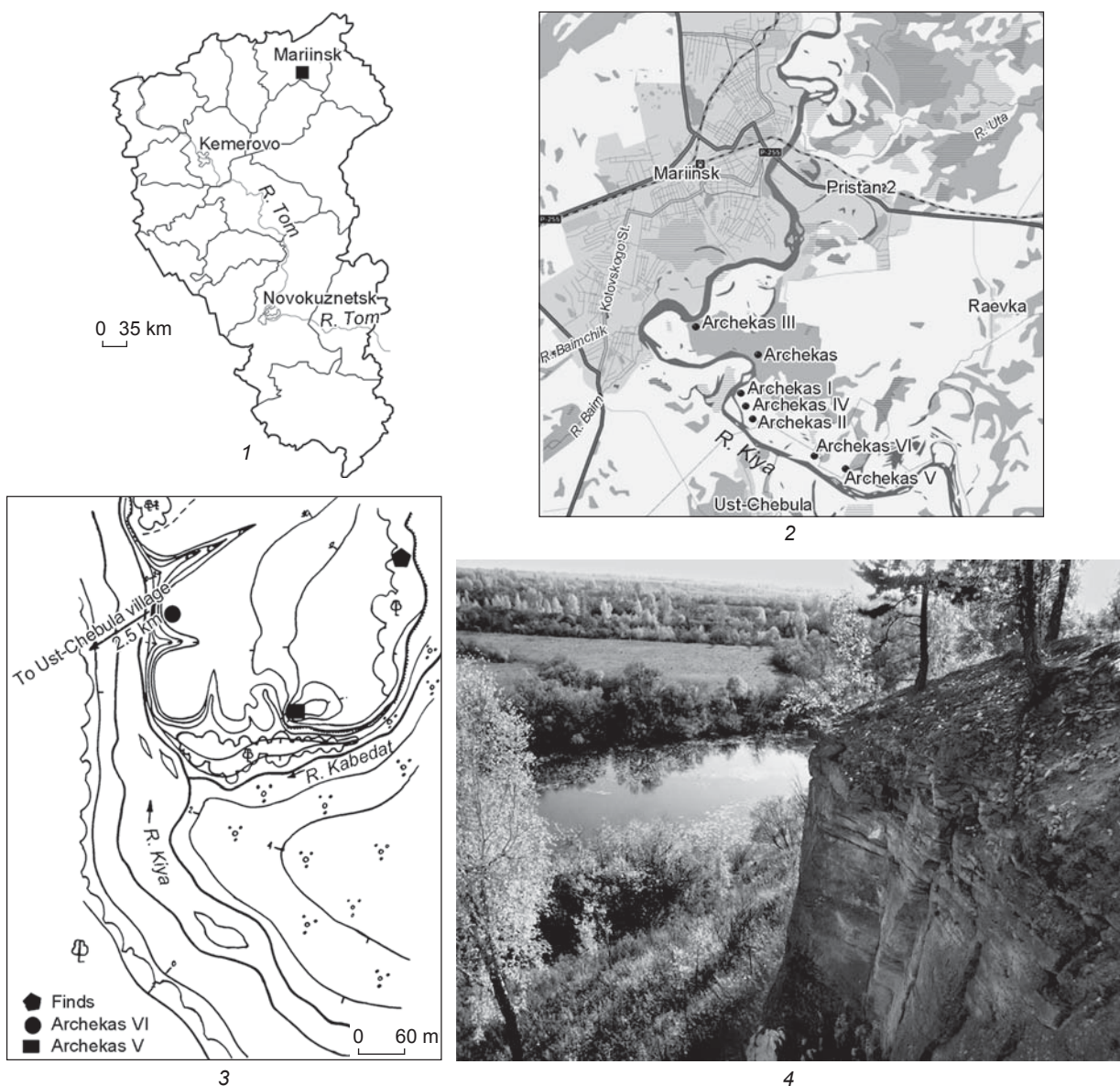


Fig. 1. Location of the Mariinsky District in the Kemerovo Region (1) and location of archaeological sites on Archekas Mountain (2); topographic plan with the settlements of Archekas V and VI, and the place of discovery of bronze objects (3); precipitous bank of the Kabadat stream with birch forest, where the objects were discovered (4).

of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS and Kemerovo State University did a survey in the Mariinsky District of the Kemerovo Region. During the works, the Expedition established the precise coordinates of the Archekas V habitation site, which was discovered by Baukhnik in 1963; a cultural layer 0.4 m thick was identified; pottery of the Tagar-Tashtyk period was collected in the outcrop. The Expedition also discovered a new site of Archekas VI of the Late Bronze Age.

The presented chronology of fifty years of archaeological works in Archekas show that this unique natural object has never become a place of targeted research. Seven archaeological sites have been discovered

on the territory of the ridge, but only two were studied in detail (Kulemzin, Borodkin, 1989), although it can be assumed that the small ridge in a flat environment was the most attractive place in terms of habitation and sacral activities for the ancient and medieval groups of the population.

Circumstances and location of discovering the ancient artifacts

In October 2015, an assemblage of ancient metal objects was accidentally found. The location of the discovery

was associated with a birch forest and the edge of a plowed field on the high steep bank of the Kabadat stream 200 m to the northeast of the Archekas V site. To find out the circumstances and the exact location of the discovery, an interview was arranged with A.P. Mironov, who had found the objects. He provided information on the depth of their occurrence; the GPS-coordinates of the discovery have been determined.

The objects were found near and along the field. The first find was a bronze cauldron covered with a stone on top. It was found standing vertically in a layer of dark gray sandy loam at a depth of 0.35 m from the present-day surface. In the humus layer above the cauldron, two plates of Devonian sandstone were found. The plates had traces of depressions of possibly artificial origin. The exact location of the plates relative to each other was not established. Probably, the cauldron was intentionally placed in a pit in a vertical position and covered with stone “lids”. Four arrowheads in a compact group were found to the south of the cauldron. A “deer” plaque was discovered to the southeast and a bronze “mirror”—to the northeast of the cauldron. Finally, a dagger was found in the same direction, but at a considerable distance from the cauldron.



Fig. 2. Bronze cauldron with zoomorphic handles (KMAEE, KP 284).
a – patch; b – handle.

Description of the finds

The cauldron (Fig. 2) was made of tin bronze*. It was damaged in ancient times, as evidenced by repairs in the form of a neat metal patch on the body (Fig. 2, a). The cauldron is a hemispherical vessel on a stand in the form of truncated cone; zoomorphic handles of square cross-section, which significantly extend to the outer side of the shoulders, are attached to the upper edge of the body. Stylized inverted U-shaped goat figurines show a horizontally elongated body and vertically placed legs. The heads on reinforced necks are slightly lowered; the eyes and mouth are not represented; the ears are rendered as semi-ovals. The horn starts from the forehead of each goat, bends behind, and joins the back of the animal (Fig. 2, b). A corded (“rope”, according to (Bokovenko,

1977: 231)) belt of three rows runs along the cauldron’s body in the area of its largest diameter; two of the corded rows are connected with a loop. The height of the cauldron is 28 cm (the height of the stand is 7.8 cm; the height of the zoomorphic handles is 5.5 and 6.0 cm). The diameter of the rim is 18 cm; the diameter of the body is 18.8 cm and of the bottom part of the stand is 10.7 cm. The width of the edge of the flat rim, which is inclined inward, is 0.9 cm; the width of the figurines (with muzzles) is 6 cm. The thickness of the wall is 0.3 cm; the size of the patch is 1.7 × 1.2 cm.

All arrowheads belong to the tanged type with flat tangs thinning out towards the ends (Fig. 3). The arrowheads are all of the same size: 5.5 cm; the only difference is the length of the tangs. Three arrowheads are bilobate with a blade of triangular shape but with specific individual features in the design of the tip and the base. Two arrowheads have tips with a lozenge-shaped cross-section and small lowered ears at the base. The rib of the lozenge transforms into a longitudinal rib, which smoothly converges with the plane of the tang in one arrowhead, and abruptly ends at the beginning of the tang in the other arrowhead. The rib in the third bilobate

*We express our gratitude to the experts from the Cenozoic Geochronology Department of the Center for Collective Use at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS, who analyzed the composition of metal samples taken from the archaeological objects using elemental analysis on the basis of energy dispersive spectrometry with a Hitachi TM 3000 electron microscope (Japan) and a Bruker Quantax-70 unit (Germany).

arrowhead starts from the tip and is smoothly transformed into the tang near the straight base of the blade. The fourth tip is trilobate with barely marked ears at the base. All the arrowheads were cast of tin bronze, and only one contains a small admixture of arsenic.

The finds from Archekas Mountain include a bronze “mirror” 8.5 cm in diameter with an arched loop in the center for attaching the object, and a bronze figurine of a deer—the so-called “deer” plaque (Fig. 4). The animal is rendered in a traditional posture for the Scytho-Siberian animal style with bent legs joined under its body. The head of the animal rather resembles an elk’s head. A small hole marks the nostrils, and a groove marks the mouth. The eye is rendered by a round hole. Its antlers are connected to its back and are represented as a short but wide rod with two tines with its end bending upward. They look more similar to an elk’s antlers. The body is thin and elongated. The gap near the scapula is a casting defect. A specific feature of this “deer” plaque is a round hole on the rump and an arched hole on the body.

The bronze dagger stands out not only in terms of the quality of craftsmanship, but also of its pattern made in the animal style typical of the Scythian cultures of South Siberia. It is a solid cast object made in a double-sided casting mold (Fig. 5). A relief bar runs along the central axis of the dagger from the pommel to the tip of the blade cutting through the guard. There are two more bars on the handle on both sides of the central bar and parallel to it. The rib on the blade is made in the same way, but all

bars converge at the tip. A very important morphological feature of the dagger is recession under the guard, but it is barely noticeable. The length from the blade to the crossbar is 15.4 cm (the length from the blade to the beak of the bird is 12.5 cm); the length of the handle including the pommel is 9.6 cm. The width of the blade is 2.7 cm; the width of the handle is 2.2 cm; the thickness (without the rib) is 0.30 and 0.35 cm respectively.

The pommel of the dagger is a sculptural representation of a bear (Fig. 5, a). The paws of the animal are stretched downwards and make the figure look as if the belly of the bear is resting upon the handle. The head is slightly lowered, but corresponds to the natural posture of the animal. A posture similar to the posture of the bear on this dagger is known in the Scytho-Siberian art of the animal style. It is called “on tiptoe” or “en pointes”. The bear is represented in a relatively realistic manner. Thus, the figurine is proportional, and the outline of the head is rendered with such precision that there is no doubt what kind of animal is represented in the round sculpture. Small ears are depicted as rounded protrusions, small eyes as round holes, and a slightly too large mouth is marked with a groove. All these features add to the typical image of a bear. The length of the figurine is 4.8 cm; the height is 3.0 cm; the thickness is 0.9 cm.

The crossguard was made in the form of bird’s heads turned in opposite directions (Fig. 5, b). The bodies of the birds were made in flattened sculpture, and the necks of the birds were executed in bas-relief in the plane of the

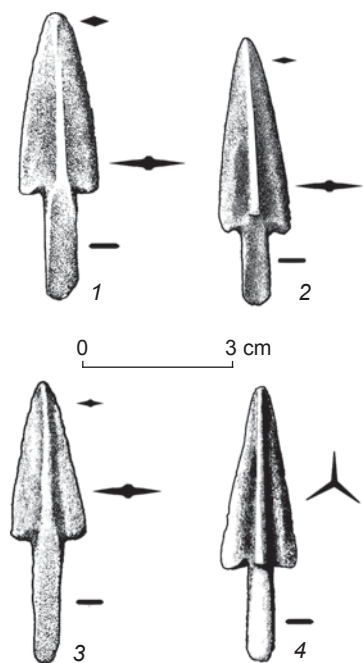


Fig. 3. Bronze arrowheads.
1–3 – bilobate arrowheads (KMAEE, KP 287, 288); 4 – trilobate arrowheads (KMAEE, KP 289).

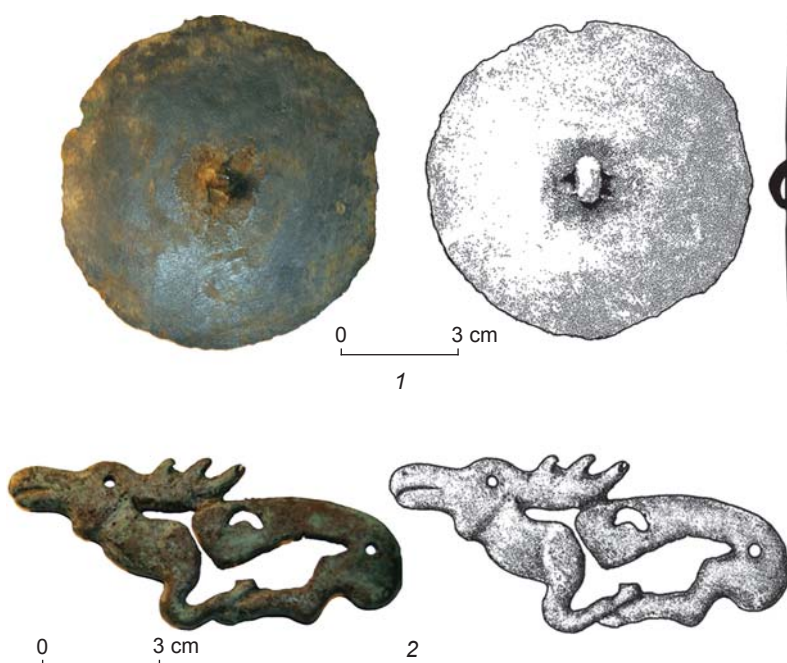


Fig. 4. Bronze “mirror” (KMAEE, KP 286) and “deer” plaque (KMAEE, KP 285).

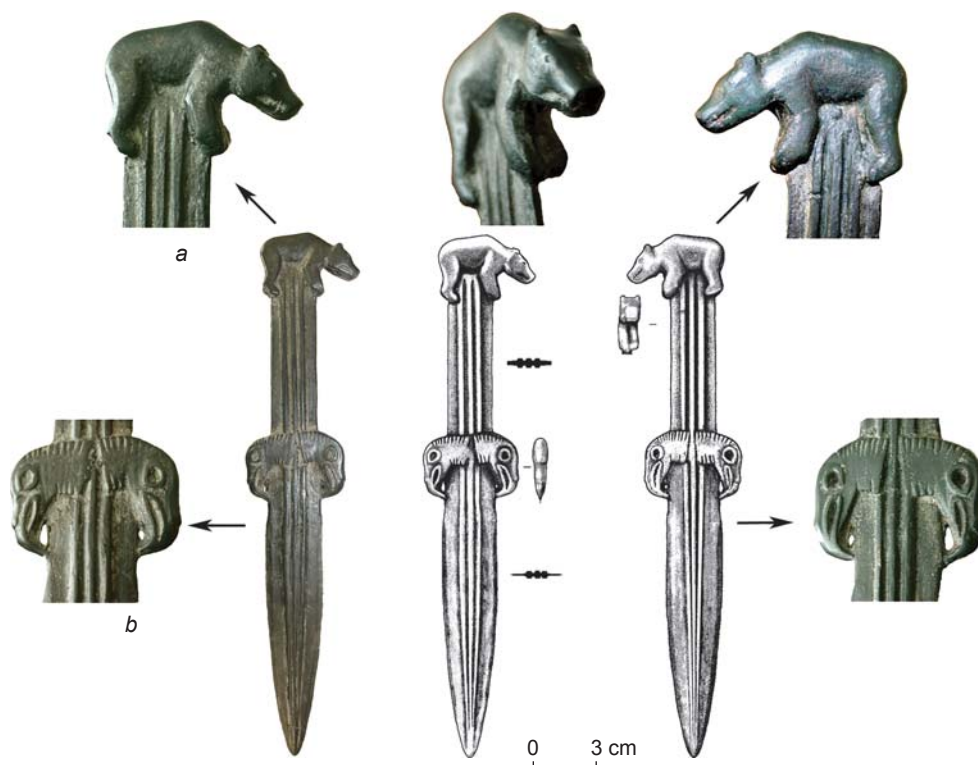


Fig. 5. Bronze dagger (private collection).

dagger. The edges of the necks are located at an angle to the central rib. Thin transverse grooves (notches) were made on the top of the necks; the length of the grooves decreases towards the tops of the heads. The bottom of the necks is decorated in the same manner. The heads of the birds are lowered down; thus the sharp ends of fairly wide beaks curved at a blunt angle (close to a right angle) touch the blade of the dagger. A segmented hole and an untreated part of the casting seam can be seen between the beaks and the blade. The eyes are depicted by relief bands forming weakly expressed ovals, and holes of the same shape. The same artistic device was used for representing the birds' beaks, but this narrow segment (band and groove) has a different size in all four cases. The operculum of the beak enhances the image of a predatory bird. In general, the image looks more like a sea eagle than a gryphon, but the iconography of both is identical in the Scytho-Siberian style.

Historical and archaeological interpretation of the bronze objects

From a general point of view, all bronze objects that were found together with the cauldron are associated with the cultures of the Scythian period, primarily with the cultures of Southern Siberia. Cauldrons are common Scythian objects, but cauldrons similar to the Archekas

vessel have been found only in the area of the Tagar culture. Thus, a small cauldron on a stand with vertical handles of cast figures of mountain goats was found in the 1920s in the Minusinsk Territory (currently kept in the Irkutsk Museum of Local History, KP 7486-36); it was first published in the article by E.R. Rygdylon and P.P. Khoroshikh (1959: 255–256). The difference is only a more expressive interpretation of the image of the goat: the muzzle is lowered, the relief horns, which rest on the neck repeat its bend; the legs are slightly bent; the tail is more pronounced and is bent upwards. M.P. Zavitukhina provided a description of the cauldron's handle with the stylized figure of a mountain goat from the collection of I.A. Lopatin, accidentally found in the village of Chadobets of Yenisei Governorate (State Hermitage Museum, inv. No. 5531/1482) (1983: 38). Stylistically, the fragment is similar to the handles of the Archekas cauldron, but there are some differences, including the size of the figure (11.2 cm), the shape of the straightly extended muzzle with a pronounced projection of the supraorbital arch, and the absence of a tail. Stylistically similar cauldrons, but with the handles in the form of horses, were found near the village of Tigritskoye in the Minusinsk Territory (Chlenova, 1967: 283), at the Chernaya Rechka south of the city of Tomsk (Museum of Tomsk State University, KP 7313), and near the village of Kolyvan on the Chaya River, about 12 km from the Kulaika Mountain (Myagkov, 1929: 60).

In accordance with the established typological features, the cauldrons with zoomorphic handles belong to type A I/5 (Chlenova, 1967: 94); in accordance with the morphological features, such cauldrons belong to the subtype A-1 of type I (Bokovenko, 1981: 46). N.A. Bokovenko suggested that they were produced in the Minusinsk center (Ibid.). The chronological attribution of the cauldrons causes some problems among specialists, since most of the objects were accidental finds. An exception is the burial mound of Arzhan-2 in the territory of Tuva, where two cauldrons have been found behind the wall of the burial chamber (Chugunov, 2004: 25–26). It is interesting that one of these cauldrons was identical to the Arshekas cauldron in size, proportions, “corded” decoration, and U-shaped handles, which, however, were not in the form of animal figures. As far as dating is concerned, Bokovenko considered it premature to establish the chronology of the cauldrons; one could only assume their emergence (in particular, of type I) approximately in the 8th–7th centuries BC (1981: 49). Zavitukhina attributed the cauldrons with the zoomorphic handles to the Early Tagar objects of art with archaic imagery. She considered the pronounced geometrization of form to be one of the style-defining features of these objects. According to Zavitukhina, such cauldrons should be dated to the 7th–6th centuries BC (1983: 22). N.L. Chlenova expressed the same point of view when she noted that the handles of the cauldron from the Irkutsk Museum were made in the typical “Minusinsk style” of the 6th century BC, but allowed for the existence of similar products at a later period when cauldrons became a part of cultic objects (1967: 95, 97). Her idea that the cauldrons with the zoomorphic handles did not follow the main line of development in this category of objects in the Tagar culture is quite interesting. Rygdylon and Khoroshikh allowed for the existence of such cauldrons in the Late Tagar period up to the Tashtyk period (1959: 258).

Bronze tanged arrowheads, both bilobate and trilobate, were typical of the cultures of the Scytho-Siberian world inhabiting its eastern parts. Extensive academic literature is dedicated to the publication of such arrowheads; therefore we will limit ourselves to only some studies on the archaeology of Southern Siberia and the adjacent territories. Thus, describing Tagar bronze arrowheads, Kulemzin noted that the type of bilobate tanged arrowheads was traditional for the local population, although some parallels are known from the sites in the eastern regions of Central Asia (Hudiakov, Erdene-Ochir, 2011: 74; Volkov, 1962; Tsybiktarov, 1998: Fig. 63). Kulemzin established the time of such arrowheads as the 4th–3rd centuries BC (1976: 49–52). A.I. Martynov dated them to the 5th–4th centuries BC in the forest-steppe territory of the Tagar culture (1976: 10–13). Chlenova considered bilobate arrowheads to be a

separate type and dated them to the 7th–6th centuries BC (1967: 41–42). The same situation is with the area and chronological range of trilobate arrowheads, although they appear not only in the areas of the Tagar culture, but also in Southern Siberia, the Transbaikalian region, and Mongolia. Thus, scholars date the Tuvan arrowheads of this type to the 7th–6th centuries BC, also allowing for the possibility of their existence in the 5th century BC (Chlenova, 1961: 137) or in the 5th–4th centuries BC (Chugunov, 1999: 36, 44).

“Mirrors” similar to the Arshekas “mirror” were the most important objects in the burial ritual of the Southern Siberian population in the Scythian period. They occur in great numbers in the necropolises of the Tagar culture. Undeniably, our “deer” plaque also belongs to this culture, which is confirmed by its iconographic and stylistic features (Bobrov, 1973: 17–18). In addition, these features make it possible to attribute the plaque to the 4th–3rd centuries BC. The bend of the hind leg in the thigh area as well as the holes on the rump and the body of the animal are untypical features compared to other Tagar plaques, and it is tempting to regard these features as transformed elements of the Sayan-Altai style.

According to its morphological features and artistic style, the dagger undoubtedly belongs to the Scythian period and was made by Tagar artisans. If its proportions and general appearance are typical of the daggers used in the cultures of the Scytho-Siberian world, the design of the pommel and crossbar in the animal style is more typical of Tagar bladed weapons. In addition to finding the dagger in the northwestern periphery of the area of Tagar culture, its cultural attribution is confirmed by another feature—the recession on the blade under the guard. G.A. Maksimenkov and A.M. Kulemzin convincingly proved that this feature was typical for the evolution of daggers in the northern forest-steppe regions of the area of the Tagar culture (Maksimenkov, 1961: 306; Kulemzin, 1974: 34). The posture of the bear emphasizes the attribution of the dagger to the South Siberian animal style of the Scythian period. Daggers and knives with the pommel in the form of the animal standing “on tiptoe” are not so numerous in the territory of Southern Siberia, and they have been predominantly found in the area of the Tagar culture (Bobrov, Moor, 2011).

Four daggers with pommels in the form of the figurine of a wild boar standing in such a way that its legs come down to the handle, originate from the Middle Yenisei region. The same pommel appears on the dagger found in the burial mound of Arzhan (Gryaznov, 1980: 22, fig. 11, 3, 4). The handles of some Tagar knives are also decorated with the figure of a standing wild boar (Grishkin Log, barrow 16, burial 1 (Maksimenkov, 2003: 40, Chlenova, 1997: 16)) or elk (Podgornoye Ozero, barrow 1, burial 3; Kichik-Kyuzur, barrow 2, burial 7 (Zavitukhina, Morozov, 2003: 107, Zavitukhina, 1983: Pl. 151–152)).

Such representations of hoofed animals to a greater degree correspond to the art of the eastern regions of the Scythian world, but as pommels they more often occur in the area of the Tagar culture. Representations of animals in this posture have been found on stone surfaces or as bas-reliefs on metal. The distinctive features of the dagger are the image of the bear on the pommel, the rib of triple bands, and representations of sea eagle heads, which are very rare for Scytho-Siberian art (Shulga, 2002). The image of the bear appears in the toreutics in the second half of the first millennium BC in the Novosibirsk region of the Ob (Troitskaya, Durakov, 2003) and, most likely, is associated with the Kulai migrants from the regions of northern taiga. It is quite possible that the Tagar artisans were commissioned to make the dagger for the taiga inhabitants.

The location of the Archekas Ridge in the terrain gives us some reason to suggest a cultic attribution of the finds, and to regard the cauldron as a ritual symbol. It should be noted that the cauldron was accompanied by a set of objects. The finds at the mouth of the river Malaya Kirgizka, 10 km from Tomsk, represent a good parallel to our discovery. There, too, a bronze cauldron was found, which had been set in a shallow pit. A bell-shaped pommel and a pottery vessel on a stand were found at a slight distance from the cauldron (Pletneva, Mets, 1999: 11–13). The authors convincingly argue for the ritual purpose of this set of objects. It is impossible not to note the comparatively small size of the Archekas cauldron, which may indicate its non-utilitarian purpose. According to S.I. Rudenko, such small pots could have been used for kindling herbs (1953: Pl. XXIV). Rygdylon and Khoroshikh also mention this purpose in their article (1959: 256). The handles must have had some sacral and magical functions (Bokovenko, 1977: 232). Not going into detail on the semantic interpretation of the sacred function of cauldrons, which was mentioned many times in the studies by A.K. Akishev (1984: 22–28), A.L. Toporkov (1989: 89–95), G.S. Dzhumabekov (1996), and N.A. Bokovenko (1977: 232), we can note that all these scholars consider cauldrons to be the main attributes of religious commemorative feasts or cultic actions performed at specific “sacred” places. The fact that two stone plates were found together with the cauldron is noteworthy. Most likely, they were in some way functionally connected with the cauldron. Thus, A.M. Tallgren regarded the stone “tables” as supports for vessel-censers (1937).

As far as the objects discovered on Archekas Mountain are concerned, we may assume that some activities were carried out using the cauldron in the center of the settlement or on the hill above the settlement. One such hill was mentioned in relation to the discovery, and we may offer several possible explanations as to why the cauldron was placed there: it was either purposely hidden

in the ground with the hope of returning for it, remained there because of the sudden termination of the sanctuary’s functioning and the departure of its owners, or was left for the next ritual for an unintentionally long time.

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