

Phalerae of horse harness in the votive depositions

of the 2nd - 1st centuries BC in the North Pontic region and problems of their cultural background

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(1) In the history of the North Pontic region a distinctive place belongs to the phalerae - silver roundels presumably of horse harness with representations of different images - anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, and ornamented with floral and geometrical decoration. They were widespread in the North Pontic steppes and neighbouring regions during the last centuries BC.

(2) First survey of such phalerae was published by A.A. Spitsyn. The aim of his work was to discuss their chronology and to define their stylistic features. He also noted, that these phalerae belong to some culture of the turn of the era, which still is scarcely known in our antiquities".

It is due to M.I. Rostovtzeff, that the phalerae began to play a special role in the investigation of the Sarmatian Culture of the North Pontic region. He saw in those phalerae a distinctive cultural influence from the East. He suggested, that they were brought to the North Pontic Steppes with the new tribes of the Iranian origin, which came from the boundaries of Graeco-Bactria and which were known from the ancient sources as Sakoi.

As a proof to his theory Rostovtzeff point on the non-Greek character of representations on the phalerae, its polychrome (partly gilded silver), representations of a floral rosette, which he thought to be a pure Persian motive.

(3) As an analogy - even "the only close analogy" to the Pontic phalerae he takes horse trappings of the Sasanian time. He believed, that «this Persian ornaments were taken by the Sasanians from the Parthians, and by those from the Achaemenidian Persians».

He mentions also stylistic parallels to the representations on the Pontic phalerae.

(4) A deity on the phalera from Yanchokrak Rostovtzeff suggested to have closest parallels in the Graeco-Indian Art of Taxila and Hatra. With this art Rostovtzeff compares also the floral rosettes of the Pontic phalerae.

(5) These phalerae as distinctive burial goods were taken by Rostovtzeff to show the first movement of the great Sarmatian Migration in all his main works on the history of Bosphorus and the Scythia. A new assemblage, discovered in Bulgaria - the Galice hoard - Rostovtzeff suggested as the most western find, connected with the appearance of the Sarmatians on this territory.

The ideas of Rostovtzeff and his predecessors were developed by K.V. Trever in her book "The monuments of the Graeco-Bactrian Art". Actually, in this volume were published items mostly without clear provenance, which were kept in the Department of Eastern Antiquities of the State Hermitage. The idea of Rostovtzeff was taken in whole, thus, in her book Trever even has not done attempts to find analogies around the places, where some of the phalerae were found. Thus, the animals represented on the phalera found near Starobelsk in the Ukraine were declared as incarnations of the Indo-Iranian deities Indra, Mithra and so on. Afterwards many scholars noted, that some of the published articles cannot be attributed to the production of the Graeco-Bactria.

(6) A special research on the phalerae was made by N. Fettich (1953). He has done very accurate study of the new finds of phalerae from the territories of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Also he personally investigated the phalerae from the Soviet museums - those, which survived to the time. To the analysis he took as well items from the Dacian silver hoards.

N. Fettich pointed out the main decorative features of the discussing group of the material - graphical elements such as lines of dots, rows of triangles, zig-zag, running wave and ovoi. With this particular group he connected not all known phalerae, but only from the assemblages of Yanchokrak, Taganrog, Balakleja, Galiche, Scorce and Herastreu.

After all he concluded, that all these objects were produced in Olbia in the second half of the 1st century BC. He believed, that it was connected somehow with the military events of the time - wars of Burebista.

(7) In his work N. Fettich based himself on the idea of Rostovtzeff, that the phalerae were used primarily as the ornaments of horse harness and were a sign of the Sarmatian ethnicity. Existence of brooches made in the same style in the Dacian material he explained in some cases as second use of the phalerae of harness. Olbia he believed as a centre of production, in which craftsmen made items of the Sarmatian use (phalerae) for the Sarmatians, and items of the Dacian use (brooches, bracelets, torques, chaines) - for the Dacians and Getoi.

T. Sulimirsky in his book about the Sarmatians (1970) thought, that phalerae, which were found in the North Pontic region were made by the jewellers of Panticapeum. The appearance of the phalerae in the Pontic Steppe he connected with the arrival to the Crimea in the 2nd c.BC of the troops of the Pontic Army of Diophantus, and with the Mithridathes' Wars of the 1st half of the 1st century BC.

(8) In the concept of K.F. Smirnov (1984) assemblages with the phalerae were seen as signs of the Sarmatian movement from the East to the West. He supposed, that the easternmost assemblages should be dated earlier than the westernmost assemblages. Despite the work of Fettich, which he mentioned in his book, Smirnov still named all phalerae as items of the Graeco-Bactrian style. However, in some notes in his book he suggested as possible also the Bosphoran provenance of them.

(9) Phalerae were also a subject of my dissertation delivered in 1996 and published in 2001. There were pointed out several stylistical groups of phalerae.

(10) With the namely Graeco-Bactrian Style it was possible to connect a group of phalerae with distinctive compositional, stylistic, and technical features. These phalerae are slightly concave and comparatively big in size - their diameter is about 24-26 cm. Their composition is divided in three zones. In the centre one can see the main subject. It is surrounded by a classical wreath. On the border there is a row of fine ornamentation - circles, running wave. All these parts of composition are gilded. The rest of phalerae remains ungilded. This makes a kind of colour play. Such phalerae were done in pairs. A representation on the second item of the pair is done always in mirror-reflection. On the back-side they bear 3 loops, by which they were attached to the belts of a saddlery. This type of phalerae is actually characteristic to the eastern territories. Phalerae with 3 loops on the back were found even in Taxila, their representations are well-known in the Iranian world. They definitely belonged to some particular horse harness, consisted of a pair of saddlery-phalerae and phalerae of a bridle. Here it is worthy to note, that phalerae of the proper Graeco-Bactrian style were found eastwards of Volga. 3-loop phalerae of other stylistic group were found also in Kuban and Lower Don region, but never in the North Pontic region.

(11) Other group of the phalerae - phalerae of the Pontic Graphical Style. These are very high roundels, which are comparatively not so big in their size - diameter ca. 15 cm. Representations are made in low relief and richly ornamented with the punch-decoration. The main subject of most of the phalerae is a rosette with leaves of acanthus and lotus.

(12) Some of phalerae bear images of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. The border is decorated with many rows of graphical elements - zig-zag, running wave, ovoi.

(13) Some of these elements were made with some special tools and were used only on the phalerae found in the North Pontic region. This allows one to suggest, that they were made in this region. At the same time such special details are absent on the phalerae from the hoards of Galice, Scercze and Herastreu. Differently, the graphical elements on borders are made not with the poinsons of special shapes but by a free-hand. Consequently they were made in different workshops and not in one, as Fettich believed.

(14) Subjects of the phalerae of Pontic Graphical Style also cannot be suggested as of eastern provenance, they are far from eastern motives as in the meaning, as in the composition, as in the delivering. (14) Such a motive as the floral rosette came widely in fashion from the end of the 3rd century BC, which can be shown on the example of the mould-made bowls or silver cups with similar ornamentation. Other subjects also have a little in common with the art of the Hellenistic Bactria and Parthia.

135 (15) Such compositions as two pairs of animals jumped one against another are well-known as a classical subject.

(16) Human faces-masks are the motives, which rather familiar to the European monuments of the La Tène period. Some ornaments from the Starobelsk Treasure is similar to the ordinary items of Pojanesti-Lukashevka Culture.

140 (16a) Half-represented figures of deities and figures of riders are frequent on the silverware of the Western Pontic region.

145 (17) On one of the phalerae of Yanchokrak Hoard there is a creature with the shield, on which an umbon is represented. This M. Schukin connected with representations of umbons of the La Tène type.

Deity from the other phalera resembles features of the Scythian and Thracian tradition of representation - a form of the head, a headress, a composition with a bird aside, a type of the bird, ornament on the shoulders and hands.

150 (18) The phalerae of the Pontic Graphical Style were found only to the west of the Volga, in the North Pontic region and in the Kuban valley. Most of the Pontic Graphical Style phalerae belong to the other type of the saddlery phalerae - with 2 iron straps on the back. Some examples bear also 3 loops, and those ones are the easternmost, found on the territory of Kalmykia and in the Kuban region.

155 (19) The difference between the two mentioned groups of material is not confined only by their stylistical or constructional features. They differ also by their burial rite.

160 In the case of the phalerae of the 1st type of saddlery they were deposited in graves. In the case of phalerae of the 2nd type of saddlery - they were found mainly as votive depositions in the kurgan mounds or even in natural hills. The easternmost votive deposit is a find in the mound of kurgan 27 in Zhutovo cemetery, situated between the rivers Don and Volga.

165 (20) Votive depositions of the North Pontic region are not confined only by those, where phalerae were found. Much more are assemblages consisted of other objects: horse ornaments of other kind, horse bits and psalia, helmets, weapons, silver cups and so on.

170 (20a) These objects are often found in a damaged condition. Such a burial rite is not known in the Volga region, which is believed as a Motherland of the Sarmatians, and on the territories eastwards of the Volga, but it is well-known in Europe, in the Cultures of the Scythians and Thracians as well.

175 Thus, from the very beginning of their research phalerae were suggested to show the movement of the Iranian tribes to the North Pontic region from the boundaries of the Graeco-Bactria. However, they demonstrate a different tendency. Stylistical and typological features of the phalerae of the Pontic Graphical Style and their special burial rite are comparable with territories situated to the west of the Scythia. How one should interpret these finds of phalerae and is it worthy to connect them with the Sarmatians?

180 To answer the question it is necessary to define - what we mean under the terms "Sarmatians" and "Sarmatian Culture".

In the original texts of ancient authors of the early Hellenistic period the Sarmatia or the Sarmatians are scarcely mentioned. Those passages are very rare, short, and unclear.

185 (21) From the sources dated from the 5th to the 2nd centuries BC one can see that all writers connected the names of Sauromatians, Syrmatians, and Sarmatians with the Meotida and the Tanais.

190 However, we have no chance to know - are those names the different spellings of one or do they belong to different peoples. What we know more or less definitely, is that the ancient authors of later times (from about the 1st BC onwards) did not recognize the difference. About earlier sources it is difficult to judge, because of their paucity and unclearness.

195 (22) In the later sources there is a bit more information about the Sarmatians. Polybius described the treaty of the Pontic states (179 BC), in which took part one Gatal - the "kinglet of the Sarmatians". Polybius did not define the territory, from which came this Gatal, but he was mentioned as an European ruler. This does not

200 exclude the same territory mentioned before - around Meotida and Tanais.
The most important record for the fate of the Sarmatian archaeology was a line of
Diodorus (1 c. BC), that «Many years later this people (i.e. Sauromatae - V.M.)
became powerful and ravaged a large part of Scythia, and destroying utterly all whom
they subdued they turned most of the land into a desert» (Diodorus, Hist., II, 43,
205 7). This episode was the main record to suggest a massive invasion of the Sarmatians
from the East. Diodorus was not a witness to this migration. He described this as an
event, which happened a long time ago. To date this event - was always a task for
many historians researching the Scythia and Sarmatia. But one should notice, that it
is nothing in the text to suggest that the Sauromatians came from some distant land
to fight Scythia. From the text it is to conclude, that the Sauromatians invaded
210 Scythia from their own territory near the Tanais and Meotida.

(23) In one Chersonesian decree dated to the end of the 2nd c. is written about
danger from the Scythians and some other barbarians to the city of Kalos-Limen, which
was also situated comparatively close to Meotida.
215 At the same time the epigraphical sources of the 2nd - 1st centuries BC also speak
clearly about other events.
In the Decree in Honour of Protogenus (the last third of the 3rd c. BC - beginning of
the 2nd c. BC) is described the dangerous state of Olbia, which was threatened from
the West, from the Skiroi and Galatoi, usually thought as Keltoi.
220 A Decree in honour of Diophantus, which describes the events in the Crimea at the end
of the 2nd c. BC, mentions several barbarian tribes - the Scythians, Reuxinaloi,
Tauroi.

(24) In the dedication of Posideos of the second half of the 2nd c. BC, found at the
225 Scythian Neapolis, are mentioned some Satarchai. The inscription is not clear because
it is very damaged.
In the second half of the 2nd c. BC Olbia was under the protection of the Scythian
king Skiluros, whose name and a name of the city were struck on the Olbian coins. The
inscription on a marble plat newly found at the heroon of the king Argotus - a
230 predecessor to Skiluros, mentions his victories under the Thracians and Meotians. It
is important, that the king is named as "the governor of Scythia - rich of horse
pastureries". The construction of the heroon is dated not earlier than as 130 BC.
Thus, in the epigraphical and written sources records about the arrival of the
235 Sarmatians in the North Pontic region from the East are absent. Semi-legendary data
about some Sarmatia, which lays near Meotida, corresponds with the usual information
about the territory of the Sauromatians, who by ancient authors were also named as
Sarmatians.

(25) The great migration from the East into the North Pontic region in the 3rd - 2nd
240 centuries BC is not noticed either by the archaeological material. Alternatively, in
the archaeological culture of the barbarians of the North Pontic area there are more
signs, which show the connections with the Western World of the Thracians, Celts and
Germans. The traces of such connections we have also observed in the epigraphical
sources.
245 Why is it, that in all works on the history and archaeology of the Sarmatians
prevails a version about the occupation of Scythia in the Hellenistic period by the
Sarmatian tribes from the East?
Archaeological monuments relatively late were taken as an important source to
reconstruct those historical events, which are believed to be connected with the
250 Sarmatians.

(26) The investigator, who for the first time clearly shaped the concept about the
Sarmatian invasion of Scythia, which now is a part of our way of thinking, was M.I.
Rostowzeff. Many elements in his "Sarmatian paradigm" were stated as an
255 extrapolation of the later records about the Sarmatians on the earlier periods of
their history. As Rostowtzeff before he started to be interested in history of the
North Pontic area was a historian of the Roman period, the written sources of this
time gave him a stable historical portrait of the Sarmatians, features of which
became the most important for Rostowtzeff in finding the material culture of the
260 Sarmatians. The main elements of the Sarmatian concept of Rostowtzeff were the
following:

1. The Sarmatians were the eastern neighbours to the Scythians, they invaded
Scythia and became rulers of the North Pontic region. Generally this was based on the
record of Diodorus. This event Rostowtzeff dated to the transition from the 4th to

265 the 3rd centuries BC. After that instead of Scythia appeared Sarmatia, and the
Scythians were pushed to the West (Dobrudja) and to the South (the Crimea).
2. The names "Sarmatians" and "Sauromatians" are not similar, according to
Rostowtzeff, and mean different peoples. The Sauromatians were a Meotian tribe. Very
characteristic feature of them was to have many matriarchal customs in their culture.
270 Separating the Sauromatians from the Sarmatians he supposed, that these names were
mixed by the later authors, and the earlier authors used the names properly.
3. Under the common name of Sarmatians Rostowtzeff meant different tribes of
Iranian origin, who constantly invaded the Steppes of South Russia from the East.
Rostowtzeff mentions two main waves of migrations - early (Saki) and late (Yüe-chi).
275 4. The most splendid feature of the Sarmatian culture, which one could
characterise as a feature of their material culture, was a special type of weapon and
arms (katafrakta). It consisted of: a long heavy lance, a long sword and a dagger, an
armour or a chain-armour, and a helmet (usually of conical shape). All this -
according to Rostowtzeff - was different to the arms of the Scythians. This image of
280 the Sarmatian katafraktarii, described in the works of Ammianus Marcellinus (4th c.
AD), Rostowtzeff extrapolates on the earlier Sarmatians.
5. He constantly underlines the close similarity of the Sarmatians with the
Parthians, an impression he also took from the ancient sources. This connection
consisted in the special features of the Sarmatian art, which was brought with them
285 into South Russia (polychrome, animal style), in their religion (Fire-worship), in
their patriarchal way of life, and in the military organisation of their society.
To correspond to this image of the Sarmatians Rostowtzeff was looking for monuments
of material culture, which would be situated eastwards of Scythia, dated to the end
of the 4th - beginning of the 3rd c. BC, and exhibiting the above-mentioned features,
290 which could point on their Iranian origin.

(27) Such material monuments became the Prokhorovka kurgans (Orenburg group, after
Rostowtzeff). Their discovery coincided with Rostowtzeff's visit to his parents in
Orenburg in 1915. In kurgan 1 were found an iron armour, a long sword, polychrome
295 jewels, items of Animal Style, and Achaemenidian bowls - i.e. direct Iranian imports,
which gave Rostowtzeff an argument to suggest these monuments as belonging to the
Sarmatians - the new Iranian comers from the East. But by those Sarmatians he did not
mean the local population. The Sarmatians - as well as the Scythians, Rostowtzeff
imagined as a group of tribes of Iranian origin, who were a minority of the
300 population and ruled the majority of the local people. They were mounted warriors,
who came to rule the Steppes of the South Russia from the East.

(28) After his opinion even in the 4th century BC the whole Steppe eastwards of the
Don was in hands of these newcomers.
305 Rostowtzeff suggested that the kurgans near Elizavetovskaya stanitsa on the Don were
very close in the material culture to that of the Orenburg group. The third close
assemblages he located in the Kuban region and Taman peninsula (Stavropol Treasure,
Buerova Mogila, kurgans near stanitsa Besleneevskaya and Kurdzhipskaia).
Thus, approximately on the base of ten or so assemblages was formed an idea about the
310 main directions of connections to demonstrate the movement of the Sarmatian tribes
from the East to the West: Orenburg group (East, the Sarmatians themselves) -
Elisavetovskaya group (possible Syrmatae/Sarmatae) - Kuban group.
To show this movement of people from the East to the West by the archaeological
material were drawn the phalerae of horse harness,
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(29) and a group of polychrome brooches found in the Kuban region. Now its Bosporan
provenance is shown in works of M. Treister.

(30) The second wave of migrants - Yüe-chi - brought the new Animal Style. This event
320 Rostowtzeff dated from the 1st c. BC to the 1st c. AD.
Before 1917 Rostowtzeff has worked out his notion of the Sarmatian Culture, which
later changed only in details. He created a clear historical idea of the Sarmatian
Culture, he pointed out the main historical stages of this Culture and connected the
historical name "Sarmatians" with the monuments of material culture.
325 However, the concept of Rostowtzeff had its weak sides depended mostly on the lack of
archaeological material for proper analysis. In fact the culture of the early
Sarmatians was defined on the base of one kurgan mound (Prokhorovka No. 1), which was
actually not excavated fully. And the animal style of the Sarmatians he characterised
only on the base of finds from the kurgan "Khokhlach" and the Majkop-belt, which was
330 a fake, also introducing some objects from the Siberian collection of the Peter the

Great to the analysts.

335 In 20-s of the 20th century the chronological phases of the "Sarmatian stage" on the base of new excavations in the Volga-Ural region were worked out. The authority of the Rostowtzeff's theory about the Sarmatian character of the Orenburg kurgans was quite strong and this idea was taken as an axiom in future studies.

340 (31) The creator of the periodisation of the Sarmatian Culture, which is still alive, was Paul Rau. Rau was a local German - a citizen of the newly organized Republik of Germans of the Volga region, who was really enthusiastic to collect all sources about the ancient history of his region and to save them for the new generations. He tried to show the development of his region in the context of surrounding territories of South Russia and Siberia. In this way the Volga-Ural region became for him a centre, a sort of standard measure in this comparison with other regions.

345 In his early works P. Rau made an analysis of the archaeological material - scrupulous and based on new methods (for example, with correlation tables). In his last book about Scythian arrow-heads he has proposed briefly a historical concept of the Sarmatian Culture.

The statements of the Rau concept, which became a part of the modern "Sarmatian Paradigma" are the following:

350 1. The Volga and Ural steppes were the Motherland of the Sarmatians, the culture of whom spread from this territory westwards (North Pontic region) and south-eastwards (Middle Asia, Siberia).

2. The Sauromatian (6th - 4th BC) and the Sarmatian (3rd BC - 3rd AD) cultures are connected by their origin.

355 After the features of burial rite P. Rau pointed out 4 stages of the common Sauromato-Sarmatian Culture. Thus, he constructed its relative chronology. Rau took the orientation and type of a grave's form to the main cultural features. With the Sauromatian stage he connected the Culture of «Ostwestgräber», and with the Sarmatian - the Culture of «Meridionalgräber».

360 (32) It was K.F. Smirnov, who has developed and expanded the main ideas of P. Rau. Under his direction were made the wide-scale excavations in the South Ural and Volga districts. In the 1960-s the number of archaeological monuments of the Sarmatian Culture was counted in hundreds.

365 In works of Smirnov the Volga-Ural region is seen as a centre of origin of the Sauromato-Sarmatian Culture in general. This culture - as in works of Rau - is shown as a definite measure to compare with the barbarian cultures from other territories. Thus, Smirnov underlines the connection of the Sarmatian Culture with cultures of the Late Bronze Age to show the autochton origin of the Sarmatian population of the Volga-Ural region.

375 (33) Thus, since the 3rd c. BC the Sarmatian tribes slowly moved to the West. As we have seen earlier, to show this slow movement were sets of phalerae, found as votive depositions. A lack of monuments of the Volga type in the North Pontic region was explained by the low degree of investigation in this area.

380 Very important for the creating of the "Sarmatian Paradigma" was also the placing of the tribes known from the written sources (Aorsi, Siraki, Alanae) on the archaeological map. The name Upper Aorsi was in fact created to call the Aorsi, who, according to Strabo, lived above the Aorsi themselves. These tribes became to be seen as confederations of tribes. This archaeological map was connected with the chronological scheme showing the stages of the Sarmatian Culture. Thus, in this periodisation the ethnical aspect became a matter of the main importance. After the works of Smirnov the "Sarmatian Paradigma" was not remarkably changed, but it developed in some its parts.

385 In the following works of sarmatologists the chronological periods of the Sarmatian Culture became periods of the domination of some nomadic groups - the Sauromatae, the Aorsi, the Alanae. Dating of the appearance of some definite tribe on the historical scene began to influence the dating of the archaeological assemblages, intuitively connected with the historical events.

390 (34) To make a conclusion about the development of the "Sarmatian Paradigma" it is necessary to note, that initially the material culture of the Sarmatians was closely connected with the image of the Sarmatians, which came from the works of Roman historians. This connection was so strong, that it pressed other sources - epigraphical and archaeological, which - despite they were called the most objective to the ancient history - still are just passive illustrations to the historical

concepts.

400 The main difficulties arise with the identification of the Sarmatians in the North Pontic region. The archaeological picture does not correlate with the picture painted by the historians. The Sarmatian attack - if we have in mind the monuments of the Volga area) in the 3rd - 1st centuries BC is not visible.

405 After my point of view, there is no ground to suggest the Volga-Ural region as the centre and Motherland of the Sarmatians of the historical sources. The movement of some people from the Volga basin to the North Pontic region in the 2nd c. BC is no more than a speculation based on the doubtful interpretation of the fragmentary and dubious written sources.

A distant eastern influence, which is definitely clear in the material culture in valleys of the Volga, the lower Don and the Kuban from the second half of the 2nd c. BC, is not seen in the North Pontic area.

410 Who were the people in this case, who left those votive depositions with silver phalerae? This question can not be decided easily. At any rate they were not the Sakoi, who came from the boundaries of Graeco-Bactria and whom Rostovtzeff suggested as the first Sarmatians, and they were not the barbarian tribes of the Lower Volga and Ural region, whom suggested as the Sarmatians Smirnov.

415 More likely seems to compare the monuments of the North Pontic region with the western Pontic territories. This could be seen as in the artistic tradition, as in the rite of votive depositions.