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# Swords and Daggers of the Scythian Forest-Steppe

OLEKSANDR SHELEKHAN

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COVER IMAGE *Scene from the Haimanova Mohyla bowl  
(drawing after Bidzilia & Polin 2012).*

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## Abstract

War always played an important role for the barbarian tribes. It was shaped by the extensive character of husbandry and elite social organisation. As a result of elevated mobility and a militant world-view, the technical progress of nomadic tribes was incarnated primarily in the artefacts of warriors' subculture. The social and cultural function of the weapon makes it a valuable source for resolving many questions in Early Iron Age archaeology.

In my work, I comprehensively examined Scythian bladed weapons in the area of farmer tribes who lived in the East-European Forest-Steppe from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to some point between the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC. My findings are detailed across five main chapters.

In the historiography chapter, the large scientific heritage is summarised. Within, the main theories dedicated to the general and particular questions of bladed weapon research are critically analysed.

Numerous sources have been organised into the second chapter, which is devoted to the typology. Firstly, five functional metric groups were outlined. They show some functional and chronological variability. Secondly, a new classification is proposed. It is based on several main principles. Single-edged and double-edged examples are separated into two different classes because they originate from the different cultures. Single-edged weapons are divided into the two groupings due to differences in blade curvature. The division of the double-edged swords and daggers is based on the characteristics of their handles. Also, their technological features were taken into account. Due to this, eight divisions with eighteen types are outlined. Their sequence demonstrates main chronological changes in the Scythian culture.

Detailed chronological timelines for all types of swords and daggers have been built in the third chapter. Seven narrow chronological groups were defined. Each of them has a length of nearly half a century. Each type is dated using main chronological markers – precious war trophies, antique imports, sets of arrows amongst other items. This chronological division shows that the dynamic of sword and dagger development in the Forest-Steppe passed in one rhythm with nomad's weaponry. It shows that there is no chronological horizon or typological group that could be considered isolated from antiquities of the Steppe Scythia.

The fourth chapter is devoted to a spatial analysis. The main regularities in the bladed weapon distribution on the Forest-Steppe area are outlined here. Thus, it establishes how those burials found to contain bladed weapons were concentrated amongst strategic points. They were associated with land routes and production centres. Chance finds are fixed amongst a wider area. Their placement also related to borderlands, wilderness, steppe landscapes and floodplains. The earliest specimens were detected in the densely populated region on the right bank of the Dnieper, whereas on the left bank of the Dnieper and in the basin of Don the specimens occasionally dated to a period earlier than the settlement structures. Due to this, I suggest that nomads were the main distributors of bladed weapons in the Forest-Steppe.

The fifth chapter is devoted to a social analysis and historical reconstructions. Burial complexes with bladed weapons are divided into four social groups. Only some of poorer graves could be considered as farmer's burials. However, an absolute majority of complexes were associated with the nomad warrior elite. Markers of Scythian burial ritual distinguished them: precious trophies, some attributes of cult (stone altars, bronze mirrors, chariot's finials, and wooden bowls), horses and slave' burials. Also, ceremonial weapons (including oilstones and scourges), pairs of swords, zoomorphic chapes and scaly armour (especially precious and import details) are considered to be a nomad's indicator.

The correlation of swords and daggers with other prestigious artefacts and ritual features indicate high social status of a majority of swordsmen. Therefore, it is demonstrated that the Scythians were high ranking amongst the social structure of farmer tribes, and Forest-Steppe region was included in the common military-politic structure of the Great Scythia.

## Introduction

During the Early Iron Age on the East European forest-steppe zone there lived several autochthonous agricultural tribes. By a certain period, their material complex had been transformed into a Scythian material culture, although carriers of the forest-steppe variant of the Scythian culture were not Scythians by their origin, cultural and even economic type.

The formation of a new culture in the forest-steppe marked a radical change in the everyday life of the local population. First, “Scythian triad” objects from the Steppe became widespread – iron weapons, typical horse harnesses and ornamental traditions using an animal style. However, the changes not only affected material culture. By this point, the entire structure of society has undergone significant changes. This can be traced, on the one hand, by the construction of a network between ancient settlements that covered the entire forest-steppe. On the other hand, a new impetus was given to the tradition of barrow construction. These sites demonstrate the existence of a complex and stratified social organism with distinguished groups of generic aristocracy, military elite, and others. The research, outlined below, presents an analysis of one of the most expressive components of the Scythian triad in the context of the East European forest-steppe monuments. It concerns bladed weapons, which were, though not the most numerous component of the Scythian triad, but, were without exaggeration one of the most important ones.

War always played a significant role in the life of a barbarian society due to the nature of the economy and the elitist social organisation. Increased mobility and a militarised worldview led to the fact that technological progress was embodied primarily in objects related to the warrior subculture. Thanks to the social and religious functions of weaponry, these artefacts have become a valuable source in the analysis of numerous key issues of the Early Iron Age archaeology.

The question of the Scythian-type weapon origin has been repeatedly raised in connection with the search for the genesis of Scythian culture (Terenozhkin 1973, 123; Artamonov 1975, 100; Chernenko 1979, 90; 1980, 30). Research in the field of ancient weapon production has also played a lasting role (Shramko 1984, 33; Shramko 1992, 222; Boltryk, Voznesenskaia, Fialko 2003, 101).

The analysis of how Scythian-type swords and daggers spread in time and space allows researchers to reconstruct migration and military operations even with the lack of written sources (Skoryi 1983, 6–7; Fialko, Boltryk 2003, 83; Bruiako 2005, 153; Kovalevskaia, Morozova, Rychkova 2014, 152).

Bladed weapons in burials repeatedly became an indicator of the social status of its owner. In particular, while distinguishing military and aristocratic burials, finds of swords were taken into consideration by A.M. Khazanov (1975, 179–198), A.P. Medvedev (1999, 146; 2002, 157), A.Yu. Alekseev (2006, 53–56) and S.A. Skoryi (2010, 267). In the ethno-cultural reconstruction of the Early Iron Age history, the weapon complex also occupied one of the main places in analytical constructions (Olkhovskii 1997, 92–95; Medvedev 1999, 102, 146; 2002, 157; Skoryi 1990b, 81–82; 2003, 44–54; Bessonova 1999, 151).

At the same time, in recent years several generalising works devoted to the armament of certain local variants of the Scythian culture (Savchenko 2003, 3; Voroshilov 2007b, 1), or of certain groups of bladed weapon (Babenko 2009b, 19; Babenko, Shelekhan, 68; Topal, Bruiako 2012, 141; Topal, Terna, Popovici 2014, s. 9; Topal 2014a, 380; 2014, 129; 2015, 54) have been published. The research interest in the peculiarities of the swords and daggers decoration motifs has not faded either (Polidovych 2014a, 257; 2014b, 112; 2014, 290; 2014, 152; Volnaia 2015, 25; Babenko, 2016, 9).

Nowadays, there is a need for complex treatment of Scythian bladed weapons as an archaeological source with a modern treatment of the source base, since known classification schemes are not able to respond adequately to a rapidly growing source base. For instance, in the classical work on the topic by A.I. Meliukova, 73 finds were used, and only 64 of them were presented in the illustrations. As a result, the range of considered weaponry was incomplete. In addition, this system corresponds badly with modern chronology schemes and is based largely on de-certified items (Meliukova 1964).

An attempt to produce the so-called cultural typology also raises a number of issues. The cult background which has been readily ascribed to bladed weapons does not look convincing. The thesis outlining the gradual splitting of the phallic idea and, as a consequence, the evolution of bladed weaponry, does not coincide with the generally accepted theory of the discrete development of the Scythian culture and looks artificial.

The approach which divides the bladed weapons into series by an eponymous principle accurately indicates the morphological and chronological characteristics of a particular item. However, this approach also has disadvantages that manifest themselves in a significant limitation of the source base.

Despite the fact that swords and daggers are one of the most expressive categories of the Scythian triad, they do

not have a complete chronological scale. Mostly this is due to the lack of branched-out classification schemes. Consequently, dating of separate samples and some complexes is complicated; there are no clear statistics of the chronological distribution, it is impossible to synchronise the dynamics of the introduction, spread and change of certain types in different regions, etc.

Not all scholars interpret the context of the bladed weapon finds unanimously. Chance finds of swords and daggers can be considered as traces of military clashes, evidences of production or as remnants of religious constructions. However, theoretical hypotheses often do not take into account the conditions of depositional process, the environment and historical background of the finds.

It is often assumed that the bladed weapon belonged to the war elite, though there were still no clear trends in using a sword or a dagger in the funeral inventory. In addition, gender-specific features of their existence are not outlined. The nuances of social significance were considered only as a casual remark. It remains completely unclear as to whether the possibility of using a bladed weapon acted as an ethnic marker.

Taking into account the above-mentioned considerations, there is a need for research into the complex of bladed weaponry, which, although not the most numerous component of the Scythian panoply, is a vivid marker of military identity due to its social significance. The selected region, the East European Forest-Steppe, is one of the key areas of the Scythian history, where the fate of the agricultural and nomadic people crossed. According to modern understanding, horsemen were in the dominant position over local tribes, a thesis that will be demonstrated in the present book. Thus, the explored region could without doubt be named as the Scythian Forest-Steppe. Besides that, the chronological section of monuments of both Archaic and Classic stages of Scythian archaeological culture are presented here. The range of swords and daggers from this region corresponds to a set of weaponry of the solely Scythian Steppe complexes. Therefore, the results of the proposed study will be crucial for understanding the historical processes that took place in Eastern Europe during the Iron Age.



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Oleksandr Shelekhan comprehensively examines Scythian bladed weapons belonging to farmer tribes who lived in the East European Forest-Steppe from the 7th century to between the 4th and early 3rd centuries BC. The analysis demonstrates a detailed typological and chronological distribution, showing distinctive tendencies of adoption and dissemination of the different weapon types across the period and the region. The author uses this evidence to produce a social and historical reconstruction of Scythian culture. Swords and daggers found in burials relate to certain sex and age groups. The correlation of swords and daggers with other prestigious artefacts and ritual features indicate the high social status of a majority of swordsmen. The Scythians were high ranking amongst the social structure of farmer tribes, and the Forest-Steppe region was included in the military-political structure of Great Scythia during the Early Iron Age.

‘Oleksandr Shelekhan’s contribution is very original and the whole corpus of records is vital for the further development of the study of the Scythian weaponry.’

*Dr Denis Topal, National Museum of History of Moldova*

‘There is a growing interest in the Scythian world, and daggers of these types appear in Eastern Europe as well as in Iran (Persepolis, reliefs of Apadana). This research will find large interest all over without any doubt.’

*Professor Hermann Parzinger, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*

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