

Archaeology of Conflicts

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Weapon imports in the burials of the Polovtsian elites in the Black Sea – Caspian Steppe

Aneta Gołębiowska-Tobiasz

Weapon imports discovered in the burials of the elite Turkic nomads reached the steppes through various routes. They were passed on as diplomatic gifts, proving that covenants had been made and emphasizing the status and authority of the donors and recipients¹. The ceremonial weapons were custom-made at the courts of rulers, often taking into account the sense of aesthetics of nomads. Another way of transfer was the purchase – hence, in the border areas, near the river fords, artisanal settlements were established, specializing in the production of weapons preferred by nomads. These workshops were often narrowly specialized and made high-quality weapons (Kolchin 1953, 70; Orlov – Motsya – Pokas 1985, 42). Part of the military objects was undoubtedly the spoils of war.

Ceremonial weapons, capable of actual combat, also had symbolic, sacred, magical and attributive values (e.g. Izmaylov 1997, 20). Placed in the grave, the weapons were not only to testify to the bravery and prestige of its owner, they also pointed out to his social status and military rank (Izmaylov 2008, 39), which he had achieved during his lifetime, and the funeral carvings related to the preparation of the deceased for a journey to the afterlife were supposed to emphasize the ethos of a horse warrior. It was believed that, properly equipped with weapons, clothes and a horse, a warrior was a representative of a particular community, who was to be recognized by his ancestors waiting for him at the end of his final journey (Łakomska 2009, 17).

In the Middle Ages the main centers producing weapons, which were then supplied to the Steppe, were Ruthenia, Kama Bulgaria, the Caucasus, and Central and Western Asia. Weapons from the Baltic region, Western Europe and Byzantium came here less frequently.

This article presents examples of the most interesting finds of weapon imports that got to the elites of the last wave of Turkic nomads, known in the chronicles as the Polovtsy. The nomads, who migrated to South-Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 11th century, quickly subjugated the multicultural population living in the steppe and forest steppe regions. The stabilization of the encampments' boundaries and taking control of long-distance trade routes resulted in the enrichment of the elites. The political situation in Eastern Europe at that time, and above all the relative peace that prevailed in the steppes in the 11th–early to the beginning of the 13th centuries, conducted to cultural and social changes, which led to the creation of a nomadic feudal state based on European models. Ruthenia had the largest share in this process. The Ruthenian princes treated Polovtsian aristocrats as equal partners, one of the consequences of which were inter-dynastic marriages. The Polovtsy were the only Turkic

¹ For example, in 968, when concluding an agreement to withdraw from the siege of Kyiv, the Pecheneg prince presented the Ruthenian voivode with a horse, a sabre and arrows, and in return he received chain mail, a helmet and a shield (Hypatian Letopis', ПЦПА, 1908, col. 56).

people who entered into such close and long-lasting contacts with the European dynasty² (Litvina – Uspensky 2013, 23–24). From the cultural point of view, the nomads were also fascinated with the material culture of Ruthenia, which is evident from a whole range of objects, used by the ancestral Polovtsian aristocracy. These items had not only utility value, but also indicated the status of the owner, his origin and military rank. Weapons also appeared among the products in the nomadic environment.

The items mentioned in this article have been selected for their good condition, enabling a complete reconstruction of their shape, and also for their high-quality workmanship. All of them were part of the rich equipment found in the male graves of the elite members. These examples are sufficient to indicate from where the Polovtsian aristocrats obtained them and to presume how they reached them.

Protective armour

The most frequently discovered categories of protective armour, coming from foreign workshops, were helmets and iron chain mail (Rybakov 1948, 232; Alekseeva 1989, 106). The most popular among the Polovtsian elites were helmets made by Ruthenian armourers. Iron, decorated with copper sheet and gilded helmets appeared in Ruthenia around the 10th century and quickly gained fame among the nomads. A parade helmet of the Russian type discovered in the rich grave of a warrior (Tagancha, Kaniv District, Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine) is an example of mastery, combining functional and decorative values. (Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska – Musianowicz 2002, 289–290; Fig. 1).

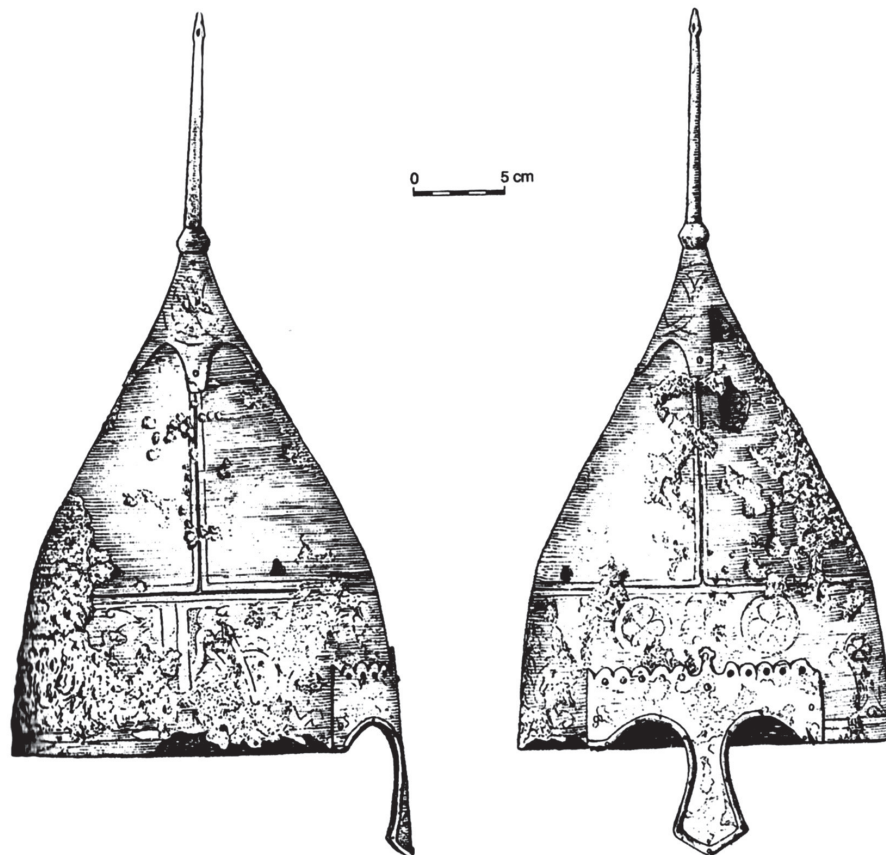


Fig. 1. Helmet, Tagancha (acc. to: Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska, Musianowicz 2002, fig. 1a–b).

2 Not counting the marriages of two Khazarian princesses with the Byzantine emperors: Justinian II and Constantine V (author's note).

These products were delivered mainly to Ros' River basin region, located in the immediate vicinity of the Grand Duchy of Kyiv and under the political control of Ruthenian princes (e.g.: Dąbrowska 1958, 126, 134; Gawrysiak-Leszczynska – Musianowicz 2002, 331). The popularity of Ruthenian helmets is proved by finds in the vast areas of Desht-i-Kipchak, e.g. in the Dnieper River basin region, in Crimea, in the northern Black Sea region, in the Don River basin and Kuban' River basin regions (Kirpichnikov 1962, 140–141, Otroshchenko – Rassamakin 1986, 27, 32; Kubyshev 1988, 301; Armarchuk – Malyshev 1997, 100; Zelenskyi 1997, 89, Shvetsov 2003, 244, Kochkarov 2004, 96–104). The Ruthenian type helmets from Polovtsian burials date back to the 12th–13th centuries.

Chain mail items were part of the funeral inventories of wealthy warriors. Chain mail goods were produced in the workshops of Kama Bulgaria, from where they were carried along the trade routes to the steppe, which was controlled by successive groups of Turkic nomads, and then to the Muslim countries of Central and West Asia (Izmaylov 2008, 65). They were also made in Ruthenia. Chain mail made with the nail technique appeared around 1200 and quickly gained popularity among the nomadic elites (Kirpichnikov 1971, 12, Biezpalyi – Larienok 1987, 263). The Ruthenian workshops could have provided chain shirts for young Polovtsian warriors, who were encamping in Ros' River basin region and were subordinate to the Kyiv princes and under their protectorate (Dąbrowska 1958, 124–125, 126, 129, 134; Gawrysiak-Leszczynska – Musianowicz 2002, 293–295; Fig. 2).

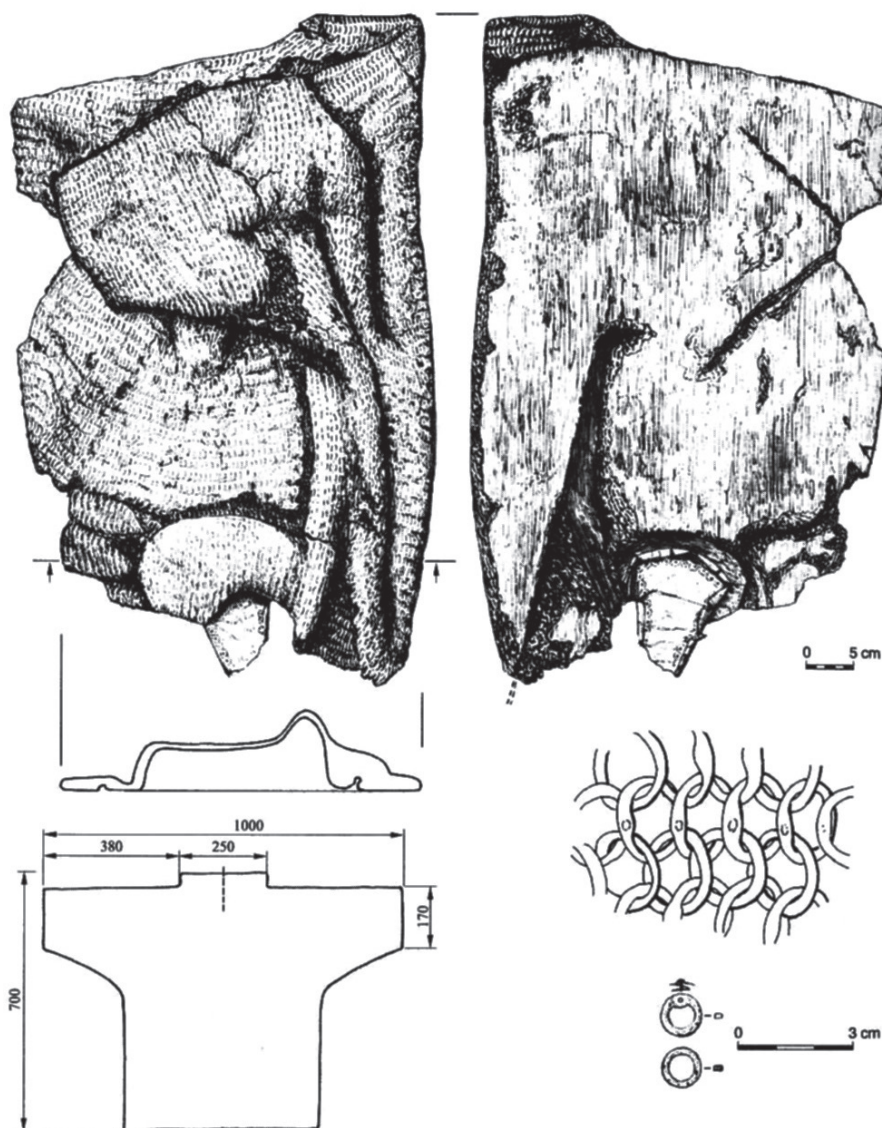


Fig. 2. Chainmail, Taganacha (acc. to: Gawrysiak-Leszczynska, Musianowicz 2002, 294, fig. 4a–d).

The mapping of the sites with chain shirts shows that the finds were closely related to the nearby long-distance trade routes. They were part of the funeral inventories in male graves in Zaporizhzhia, in the Don Basin, in the North Caucasus and in Crimea, i.e. in the entire area under the rule of Polovtsian families (e.g. see Kolchin 1953, 151; Cherepanova – Shchepinskiy 1968, 195; Biespalyi – Larienok 1987, 263; Larienok 1987, 142; Privalova, 1988, 163; Zelenskiy 1997, 89; Kuz'min 2002, 67; Shvetsov 2003, 244; Kochkarov 2004, 96–104; Liashko – Popandopulo – Drovosekova 2004, 63; Shalobudov 2012, 10; Armarchuk – Dmitriev 2014, 24).

Shields, rarely found in nomadic graves, were made either in the nomadic environment (kalkan shields) or were imported. The accumulation of these elements of the protective equipment has been noted primarily in the border zone between Ruthenia and the steppe. Preserved fragments of shields, discovered in the male burial mounds in Ros' River basin region can be used as an example. A spectacular specimen, made of wood covered with leather and plated with silver sheets, was placed in the grave of a nobleman from Tagancha (Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska – Musianowicz 2002, 295–296; Fig. 3).

In the burials of warriors from Rosava (Myronivka District, Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine), metal elements of the shields have been preserved (Dąbrowska, 1956, 129, 133). Actually it is a family cemetery with the greatest accumulation of this type of weapons in the burials of late nomads.

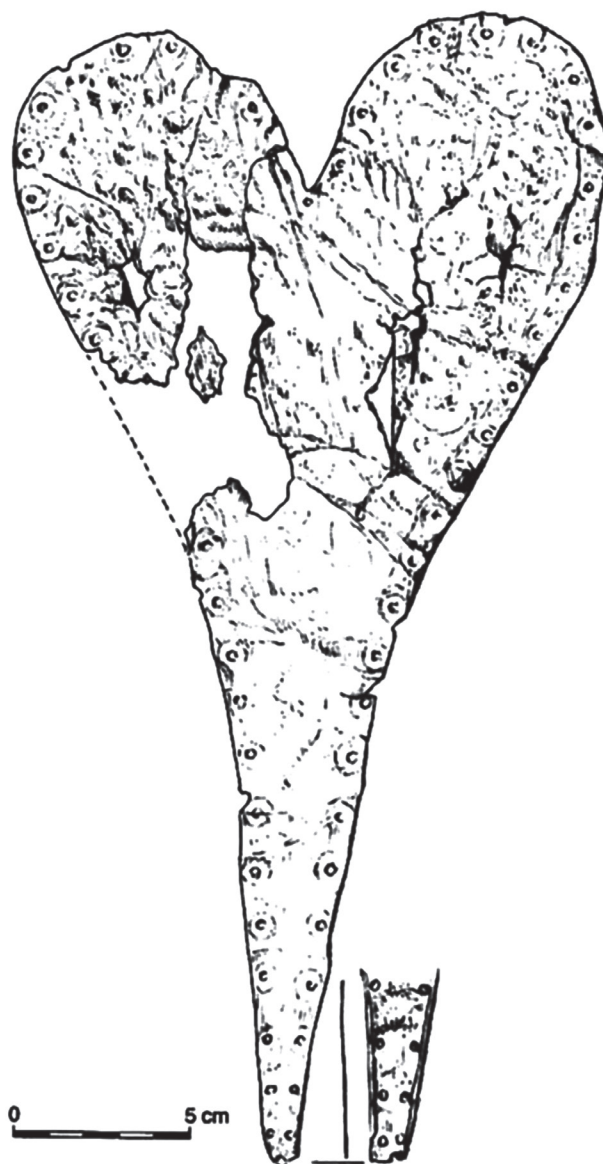


Fig. 3. Shield fragment – silver fitting, Tagancha (acc. to: Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska, Musianowicz 2002, 296, fig. 5).

Arms of offence

Slashing weapons

Deposits of sabers in late-nomad burials or complexes with a chronology from the 10th to the 14th century represent less than 1/5 of the finds within the broadly understood steppe range in South-East Europe. The number of these relics refers to the examples published in the studies of archaeological research, excavation reports or belonging to museum archives (cf. Evglevskiy – Potiomkina 2000, 120; Kochkarov 2008, 23). In most cases, the authors of the excavations unfortunately ignore the aspect of the origin of the weapons. Analyses conducted in terms of morphological features of sabers, indicate that their greatest diversity was in the 12th–13th centuries, which meant the peak of political and economic stabilization in the steppe and the beginning of the end of this status quo in reference to the Mongol invasion. The sets of grave inventories from that period also indicated that the saber was a weapon available not only to the Polovtsian heavily armoured elite, but also to the lower class of horse warriors (Evglevskiy – Potiomkina 2000, 155). A similar rhythm of the variety and quality of the sabers produced in the same period of time was recorded in Kama Bulgaria (Izmaylov 1997, 19).

Studies of the eastern zone of the European steppe have clearly shown that a large part of these weapons (sabers with scabbards) could come from the territories of Ruthenia, Kama Bulgaria and North Caucasian workshops (see Kochkarov 2008, 26–34, Armarchuk – Dmitriev 2014, 15–18). These products prove the efficient functioning of the long-distance trade routes in the 12th century, which led from the Caucasian passes through river valleys, further through the steppes to Tmutarakan, Sarkel, and then to Ruthenia, Volga region and across them, to Central and West Asia. The steppe peoples controlling the caravans participated in trade, stocking up on weapons, but also on luxury items. Trading continued uninterrupted after the Mongol invasion, as evidenced by the imports of weapons from Kama Bulgaria, dated to the 14th century (see Shalobudov – Kudriavtseva 1980, 92; Kochkarov 2008, 36; Fig. 4).

Probably most of the sabers deposited in the burials of Polovtsian warriors from the encampments, located between the lower Don and right-bank of the Kuban' river, came from Alans and Adyghe region (Zelenskiy 1998, 123). Sabers, and possibly also some pieces of protective armour (chain mail, lamellar armour, helmets), arrowheads, as well as utility items such as knives, were made in Caucasian smithies and then sold to nomads.

Stabbing weapons

Parade knives and daggers (kinzhals) are not common finds in elite graves. Three knives, which served practical, prestigious and symbolic purposes, and were not local products, are the representative examples of this category of weapons. They come from the best-known and



Fig. 4. Saber, Minovka (acc. to: Shalobudov, Kudriavtseva 1980, 94, fig. 1).

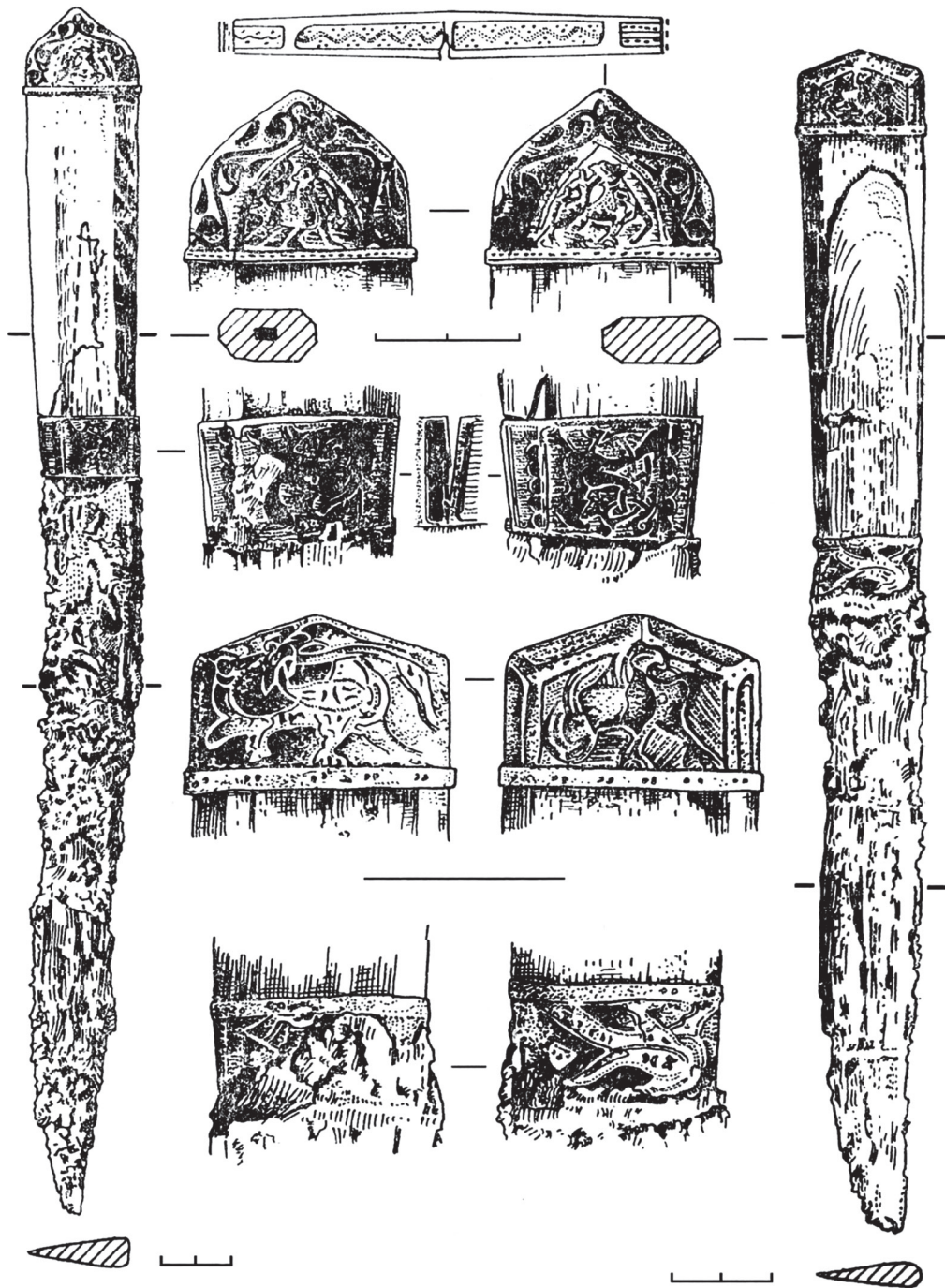


Fig. 5. Knives, Zamozhne (acc. to: Otroshchenko, Rassamakin 1986, 28, fig. 12).

still being exploited Zamozhne site (Tokmak District, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine). All three knives are unique – they were probably custom made, as no analogies could be found. The ornamental motif indicates inspiration with Ruthenian art, although the authors did not exclude stylistic influences from Danubian Bulgaria (Otroshchenko – Rassamakin 1986, 32; Fig. 5).

Blunt weapons

Flails originated from the Turkic or more precisely Khazar nomadic milieu and appeared no later than the beginning of the 8th century (Komar 2005, 220, cf. Kochkarov 2008, 81–82). They were

closely linked to the rider's combat tactics, although they could also be used by foot warriors (Kirpichnikov 1966, 63–65). In the 8th–10th centuries in Kama Bulgaria this type of weapon was part of equipment of light cavalry, and in the 10th–13th centuries, flails were a popular type of weapon also among heavy armed forces. The greatest variety of their constructions and shapes of the head and the material from which they were made comes from that period (Izmaylov 1997, 103, 110). Most of the pieces came from large administrative-trading centers, such as Biliar, Bulgar and Khulash (Izmaylov 1997, 110). In the 11th–13th centuries, the large cities of Ruthenia were the main centers that produced flails (Kyiv, Chernihiv, Novgorod). Flails, sometimes of complex shapes, were the work of foundrymen, who were familiar with the techniques used in goldsmithing. Some parade pieces were covered with floral ornaments and additionally decorated with the niello technique. These weapons were sometimes gilded, with features or other symbols related to Ruthenian ornamentation (Kirpichnikov 1966, 62–63).

In Kama Bulgaria, flails were signed with tamgas (Turkic ownership marks), a symbol of the place of production or group allocation (Izmaylov 1997, 106, 110). In the steppe zone, in the 11th–13th centuries, they represented an extremely rare type of weapon (Izmaylov 2008, 61–62). The flails were discovered: in a part of the burial inventory of a Polovtsian warrior from Tagancha (Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska – Musianowicz 2002, 307; Fig. 6A), in the burial of a man in the site Rybinskoye (Volnovakha District, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine; Klimenko 1988, 110; Fig. 6B), and in Marianivka (Vasilkivsk District, Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine; Liwoch 2019, III; Fig. 6C).

Two sites were located in the border area, in close proximity to the influence of the Kyiv principality, and the third one was in the middle of the steppe. As rightly pointed out by weapon experts, the popularity of this type of weapon among the warriors groups of South Ruthenia and Kama Bulgaria was due to the similar tactics of horse warriors and constant military interactions between these

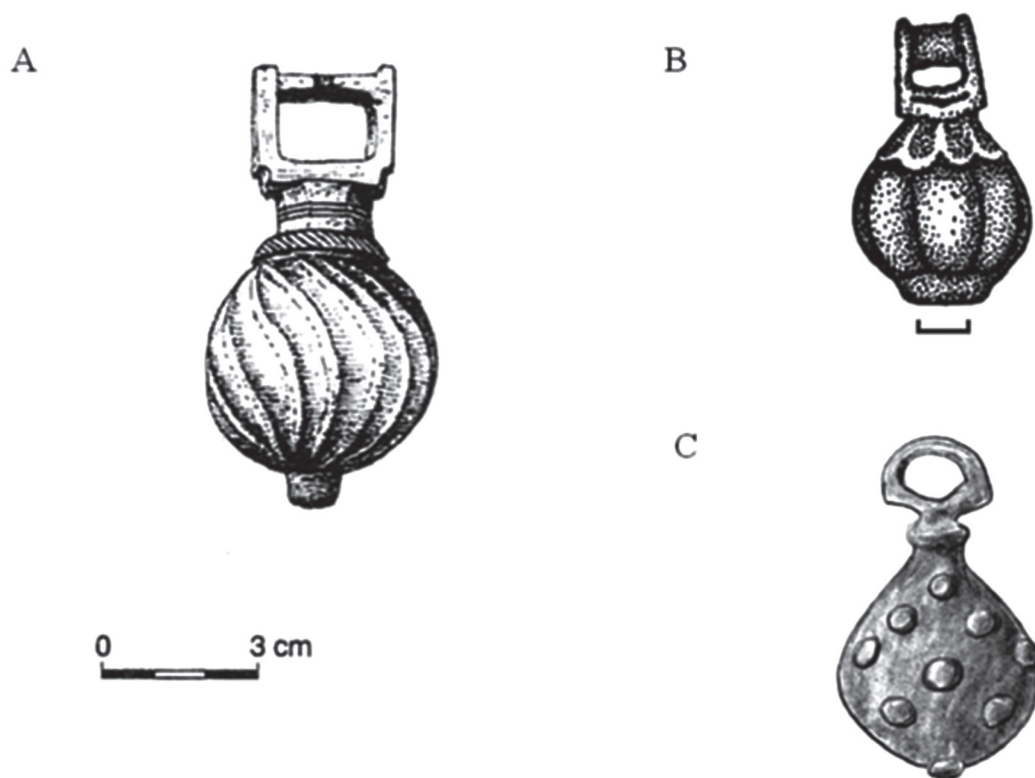


Fig. 6. Flails, Tagancha, Rybinskoye, Marianivka (A acc. to: Gawrysiak-Leszczyńska, Musianowicz 2002, 309, fig. 9b, B acc. to: Klimenko 1998, 113, Fig. 36, C acc. to: Liwoch 2019, III – without scale).

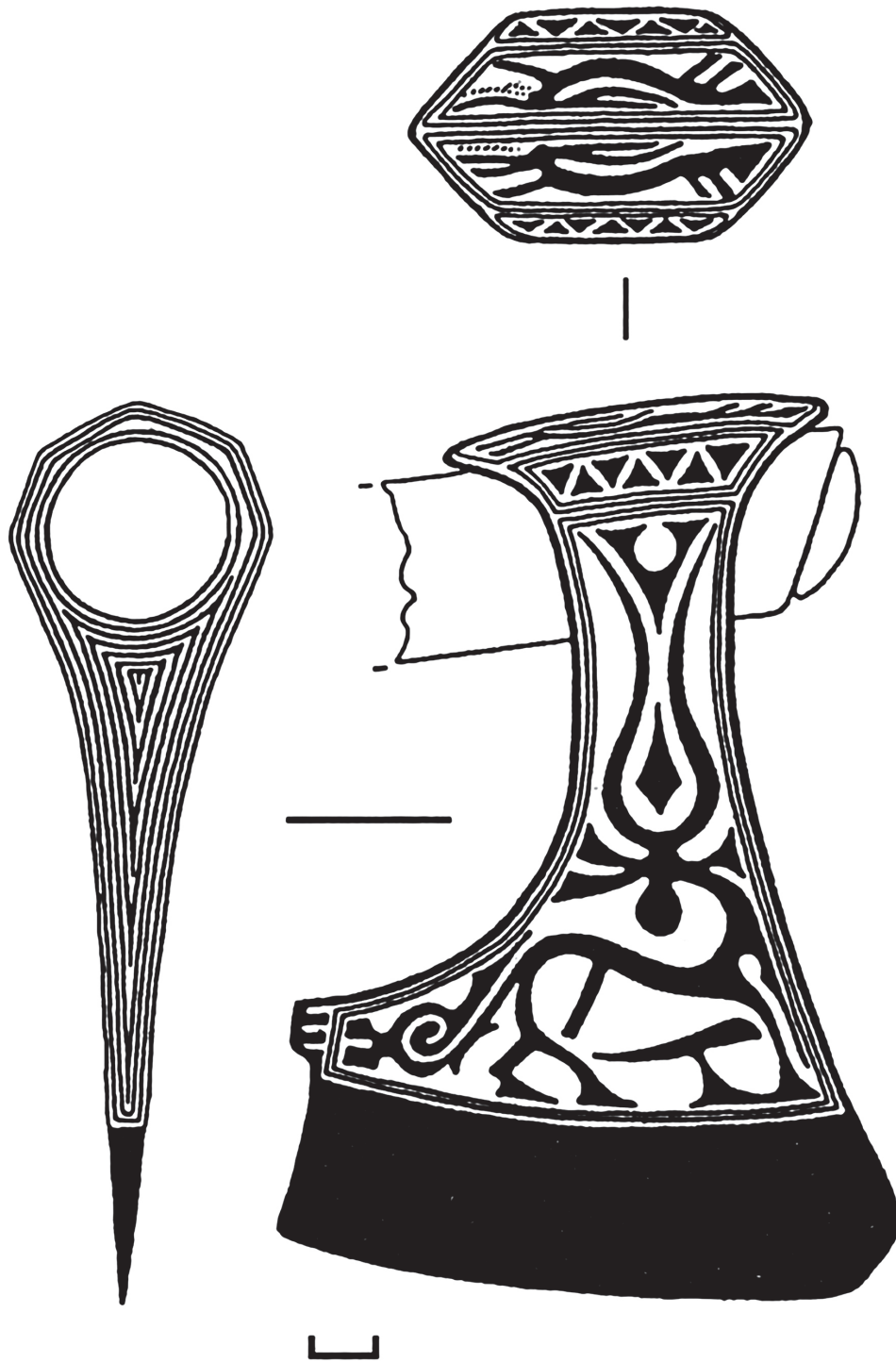


Fig. 7. Axe, Olien'-Kolodiez (acc. to: Efimov, 2000, 172, fig. 2).

countries, which happened very often in the 12th century. These weapons were not adopted by the Turkic nomads of the steppe zone, hence their few finds (Izmaylov 1997, 110).

An axe from a male grave at the site Olien'-Kolodiez (Kashirsky District, Voronezh Oblast, Russia) the weapon on both sides was decorated with a gilded, masterfully made image of an elk. The antlers of the animal emphasized the slenderness of the neck of the blade. The head and beard were covered with a geometrical ornament (Efimov 2000, 174–175; Fig. 7).

The site was dated to the late 13th and early 14th centuries. It belonged to the category of newly established ancestral cemeteries of Polovtsian aristocrats in the Volga region, with individually constructed mounds for the dead. They belonged to the class of the Polovtsian elite which were subordinated to the Golden Horde khans. It is interesting that the chronology of this type of axes is limited to the 11th–12th centuries. Researchers indicate that they were made in the Baltic area (Walicki 1971, 870; Kulakov, 1993, 123–124). It seems obvious that the parade weapons and the aesthetics of ornamentation were highly appreciated, emphasizing the prestige of the owner, even if the weapon was not one of the latest technical achievements of armourers.

Throwing weapons

Few finds from the steppes of the Dniester River basin region and Ciscaucasia (Shalobudov, Yaremaka 1986, 146; Armarchuk – Dmitriev 2014, 19–21) indicate that the bows were imported from the area of Ruthenia and Kama Bulgaria. However, these are single identified cases. The sites date back to the 12th century.

Horse and its equipment

Finally, attention should be paid to an important factor that does not fall directly into the category of weapons. This factor determined the victorious strategy of fighting by the steppe people and the success of their culture model, which was developed at the end of the Neolithic and continues uninterrupted until these days, although not in such an expansive and dangerous scale. It is about the horse and its equipment. The nomad horse was not only a riding, pack and draught animal. The horse was associated with rich symbolism, including the material culture of nomads, but also its spiritual aspect. The horse was a divine, magical, sanctifying, and attributing animal (see: Lvova – Oktiabrskaya – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988, 39; Devlet – Devlet 2005, 107–11). His equipment had similar attributes. In modern language, its role can be defined in the following way: the value of the steed and its tack reflects the quality of the owner. Hence, the old traditions of horse breeding by Asian ethnic groups were derived from such perception of the horse role. In consequence there was also the development of the nomadic saddle construction and the ornamentation of the equipment. The saddles were lined with ornamented, often symbolic, bone plaques, were covered with expensive, delicate leather, fitted not only with precious metals but also inlaid with precious stones. The elements of the bridle, breastplate and crupper were characterized by an extraordinary variety and richness of decorations. The style of the decorations was also an indicator of wealth, military rank, social status and often the ancestral or „ethnic“ origin of the warrior.

Few osteological studies indicate that both noble horse breeds and less valuable crossbred horses were imported from Asian areas (e.g. Samoylovskiy 1972, 106; Gebov – Yatsenko 1998, 46), as well as saddles and horse equipment (see Gebov – Yatsenko 1998, 50; Kubarev 2005, 125) or their parade parts. This proves the uninterrupted contacts, including trade ones, with fellow families that did not undertake the journey to new areas for various reasons. The discovery of a spur with buckles in the site Bilozirski Liman (Kamianka-Dniprovska District, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine; Pleshyvenko 2007, 32, 35: figures 4: 3–4, 15) was a signal that Turkic nomads were not unfamiliar with riding gear typical for the Western Europe. The spur was part of the unique and very rich funeral equipment of a horse warrior. The predominance of Ruthenian products proved his high social status and could indicate political ties with Ruthenian princes or the control of an important trade route leading „from the Varangians to the Greeks“ by the family he represented. As nomads did not use spurs, this type of item played a rather prestigious role, emphasizing the social position of the owner and probably his ties with the Kyiv court. Two more late nomadic sites (12th–13th/14th century), in which a pair of spurs was found, were located in the Kuban' steppe (comp. Zelenskiy 2008, 478–479, 481: Fig. 1).

Two heavily armed and richly equipped members of elite cavalry were buried there. Spurs probably indicated their social importance and, perhaps, high military rank.

The dating of the burials, in which the above-mentioned categories of weapons were discovered, covers the 11th-beginning of the 14th century and falls on the period of stabilization, consolidation of the political and economic power of the Polovtsians and the decline of their European-style state under the pressure of a new military force. The above examples show that most of the weapons that met the expectations of the Polovtsian elites as regards their quality, combat functionality and reason for respect came from three sources: from the workshops of Ruthenian craftsmen, armourers from Kama Bulgaria and the Caucasus. The inflow of arms imports is especially visible within the encamps located near trade routes („from the Varangians to the Greeks“, the Baltic-Caspian trade route, the Great Silk Road, the western part of the Great Siberian Route). The proximity to the south-eastern border of Ruthenia and the North Caucasus was also important. Members of the highest social class of Turkic nomads often took part in military and political events relating to the neighboring areas, and the information on this subject is confirmed by Ruthenian sources and Georgian chronicles. While the Polovtsians played a significant role in the history of the Rurik and Bagratid dynasties (e.g. Litvina – Uspenskyi 2013, 20–43; Murguliya – Shusharin 1998, 115–153), contacts with the Bulgarian khans are not recorded in written sources. Archaeological sources fill this gap and indicate that there certainly was a trade exchange with the dynamically developing Kama Bulgaria. The peak of its cultural and economic development is synchronous with the Polovtsian power being built on the steppes and falls on the end of the 11th–12th centuries. Besides large trading centers with specialized crafts, producing luxury items intended for sale or for individual orders, there were also centers producing the required categories of weapons with utility (combat) value, mainly in border zones (Ros' River basin region, Ciscaucasia). Ros' River basin region example is significant here. This area became a buffer between the steppe controlled by the Polovtsians, and the lands of the Kyiv principality, whereas the Polovtsian family ruling over the Turkic nomads with the consent of Ruthenian princes (minor Turkic families, called in written sources Pechenegs, Kovuys, Berendeys, Torks), was most likely related to the Rurik dynasty (see Gołębiowska-Tobiasz 2014, 128–129). The Polovtsy, who ruled over the North Caucasian settlements, controlled the main routes of the Great Silk Road, which led across the mountain passes. Near the paths of this trail, as well as deep in the valleys of mountain rivers, burial mounds were discovered, in which outlanders were buried, with, among others, weapons from the Caucasian workshops. The mastery of metallurgy and the high craftsmanship of metalworking by the people of the Caucasus had been valued since the beginning of its development by successive waves of people with different cultural models, inhabiting the foothill and steppe zones. Caucasus metallurgy had a significant impact on the shaping of the material culture of nomadic peoples, from the end of the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages. No wonder that the products of Caucasian metallurgists were also appreciated by the Polovtsians.

The role of an intermediary in the long-distance distribution of raw materials and goods, including military, from the Baltic territories was played by Ruthenia and Kama Bulgaria. They were not interrupted by the Mongol invasion, which is visible from the inventories of the newly emerging nomadic elites.

The Polovtsian aristocracy, just as the chronologically older Turkic elites of the Bulgarians, Khazars and Pechenegs, while conquering the Black Sea-Caspian steppe, used both, the possibility of acquiring luxury items, including parade weapons or unique weapons, manufactured by specialized workshops of neighboring countries or imported by merchants from distant parts of the world, as well as the products of local craftsmen living in the areas under their authority. Aesthetics of the manufacture in accordance with the nomadic sense of beauty, signaling high social rank in the society by using certain types of weapons unavailable to the lower nomadic classes, the image of the world and its order (sacred context), and finally the combat effectiveness of weapons were the factors which had an impact on the acceptance and adoption of some elements of the foreign weapon by the nomads.

Due to the lack of archaeological sources relating to the lower social classes of the Turkic nomad community, it is difficult to assess which categories of weapons from different cultural environments

were preferred and how they were obtained most often, if at all. The flow of goods probably took place, but undoubtedly, these goods differed qualitatively and quantitatively in relation to the weapons owned by the elite. Unfortunately, neither the grave sites nor the seasonal settlements provide any more detailed information in this regard.

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