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# Studies

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

### CEREMONIAL AKINAKES FROM FILIPPOVKA BETWEEN THE CONTEXT, CHRONOLOGY, AND ICONOGRAPHY

**Abstract:** This article presents the iconographic analysis and contextualization of a unique object in the archaeology of the Eurasian steppes: a particular kind of sword, also known as an *akinakes*, identified during regular excavations in the Filippovka-1 cemetery. The ritual sword was found in Barrow 4, Burial 2, and features an elaborate iconographic scheme made of gold which is used for the decoration of both sides of the blade and the handle of the object. The paper provides categorization and precise analysis of the scenes and figures represented on the blade which, although apparently difficult to interpret, are in fact characterized by a series of repetitive patterns alternating with single scenes of a more “ritual” character. In addition, a new analysis of the sword’s chronology and its general contextualization are proposed.

**Keywords:** *Filippovka, archaeology of the steppes, akinakes, ritual sword, animal style.*

#### INTRODUCTION

One<sup>1</sup> of the most characteristic archaeological finds from the Eurasian steppe territories is undoubtedly a particular type of metal sword known in the specialist literature as an *akinakes*<sup>2</sup>. It is an iconic object that first characterized the nomadic populations of the steppe but later found its way into the cultural world of the Achaemenid Empire. In relatively recent years, during excavation of the Filippovka-1 cemetery located in the Ural Mountains area (Figs. 1-2) in the territory of the modern Russian Federation, among the extraordinary finds discovered by archaeologists in the various burials excavated, one object in particular stood out for the high quality of its manufacture and the richness and distinctive nature of its iconographic apparatus (Fig. 3). It is an iron *akinakes*, with a complex decoration applied in gold which is the real object of this study. This unique sword has been subject to the systematic analysis of its archaeological context and its iconography; its chronological and functional contextualization within the extensive panorama of the funerary archaeology of the Eurasian steppes are outlined.

<sup>1</sup> The contents of the present article have been thought together by all authors. Specifically, D. Topal has written “The Filippovka Specimen in the Context of Ceremonial *Akinakai*”, A. Cesaretti has written “Analysis of the Iconography”, R. Dan has written “The Filippovka Sword: Morphology and Dimensions”, “Analysis of the Decorative Themes” and “The Iconography of the Sword in the Context of Animal Style Iconography”. The authors have written “Introduction” and “Conclusion” jointly.

<sup>2</sup> On this kind of weapon, see GINTERS 1928, MELYUKOVA 1964, VULPE 1990, SHELEKHAN 2020, TOPAL 2021.

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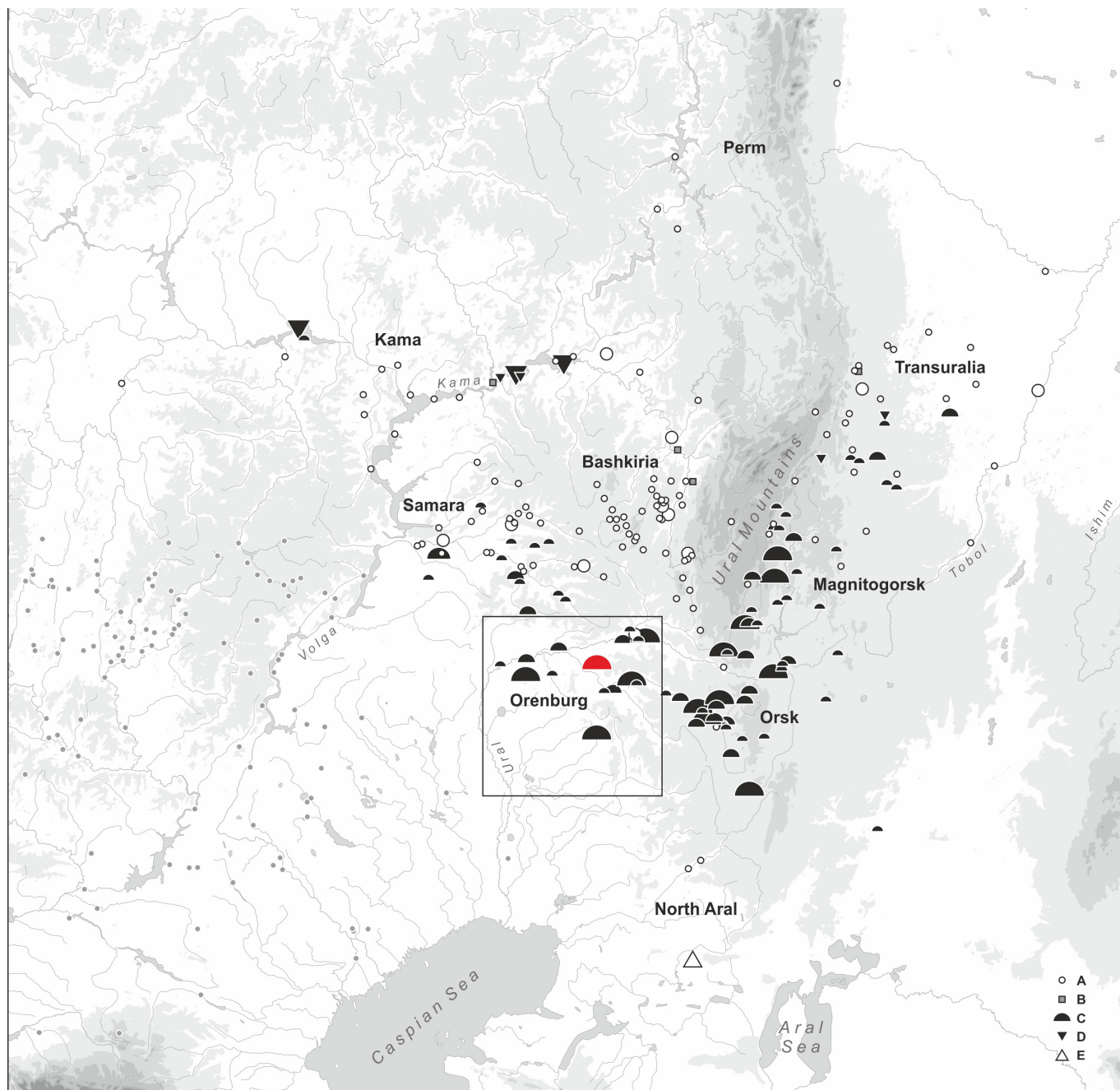
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**Fig. 1.** Distribution map of the *akinakai* in Transuralia; Filippovka is shown in red (A - stray finds, B - settlements, C - barrows, D - hoards, E - sanctuary).

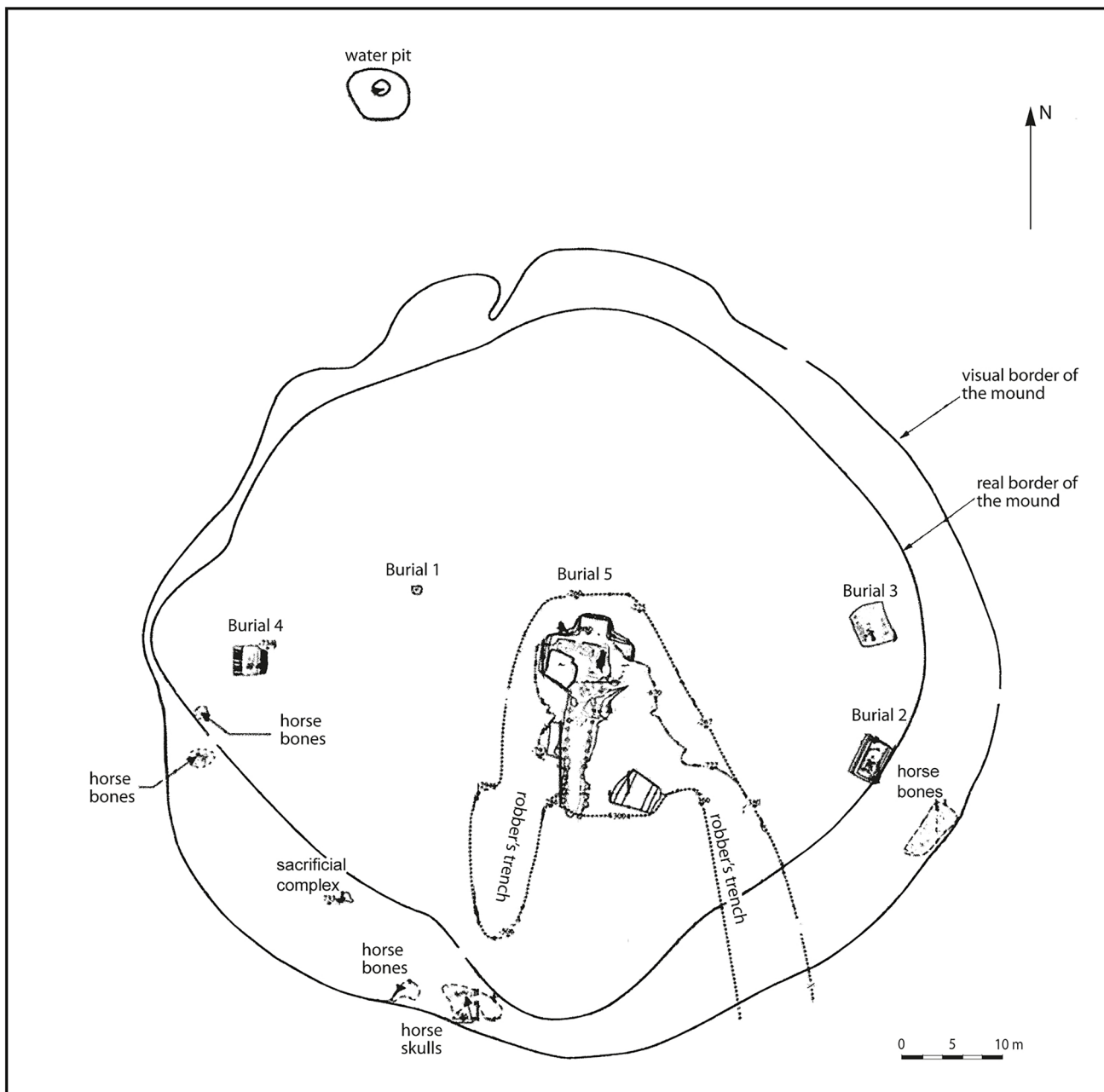
In this study, the archaeological context and chronological proposals advanced by archaeologists for the single object and its context are described and discussed; subsequently, the sword itself is analysed in detail, in terms of both its morphology and dimensional aspects. Lastly, particular attention is paid to the most characteristic and important element in terms of its significance, i.e. the iconographic apparatus. The sword is fully decorated on both sides of the handle and the blade, with decorations of an unusual style characterized by a sense of *horror vacui* that makes the assemblage of decorations difficult to read and understand at first glance. The study enabled the assemblage of figures to be recognized as an example of the famous “*animal style*” characteristic of certain periods of steppe art, and the

isolation of a series of scenes that have been the focus of a specific classification and interpretation exercise. This study led to an interpretation of the scenes depicted on the sword and a new chronological interpretation of the object, but not necessarily of the context, an aspect that will be taken up in the conclusions.

The Filippovka-I burial ground received worldwide acknowledgment thanks to the research of Anatoliy Pshenichnyuk in 1986-1990<sup>3</sup>, when 17 mounds were explored, including one of the elite mounds (No. 1), located in the central part. In 2004-2009 under the leadership of Leonid Yablonsky, research was resumed<sup>4</sup>, as a result

<sup>3</sup> PSHENICHNYUK 2012.

<sup>4</sup> YABLONSKY 2011, 7.



**Fig. 2.** Plan of *Kurgan 4* in the Filippovka burial ground (after YABLONSKY 2010, fig. 10).

of which 12 more barrows were excavated, including the second elite Barrow 4, in one of the burials of which a unique ceremonial sword was found (Fig. 2). To date, there is no generally accepted proposal concerning the absolute chronology of Filippovka-I<sup>5</sup>; <sup>14</sup>C determinations have not allowed its clarification<sup>6</sup>. Based on palaeopedological analysis, a hypothesis regarding its relative chronology has been proposed. This involved extension of the *late group* of the 4th century BC to include Barrows 11, 13, 23, 25 and 28; Barrows 1, 4, 15, 16, 26, and 27 were considered *early*, dating to the second half of the 5th century BC, and between them are mounds of the “*intermediate*” phase<sup>7</sup>.

The early date of the burial ground was determined on the basis of Achaemenid imports (e.g. a silver amphora

from Burial 4, Barrow 4) to between the second quarter and middle of the 5th century BC<sup>8</sup>. However, even earlier dates have also been proposed for Barrow 1, e.g. “the second half of the 6th to the first half of the 5th century BC<sup>9</sup>. The *terminus ante quem*, most likely, can be limited to the third quarter of the 4th century BC because there are no sets of 3rd century BC arrowheads in the burials, although exclusively 5th century BC arrowheads are present. For prestigious items the phenomenon of “chronological delay” is known, so the most generally accepted proposal limits the existence of the Filippovka-I burial ground to five to seven decades, from the end to the third quarter of the 4th century BC<sup>10</sup>, i.e. the classical Scythian culture.

<sup>5</sup> TREISTER/YABLONSKY 2012, 282.

<sup>6</sup> KHOKHLOVA/ZAZOVSKAYA/CHICHAGOVA 2011, tab.1.

<sup>7</sup> KHOKHLOVA *et alii* 2011, 36.

<sup>8</sup> YABLONSKY 2009, 156.

<sup>9</sup> UMANSKY/SHAMSHIN/SHULGA 2005, 75-75.

<sup>10</sup> TREISTER/YABLONSKY 2012, 284.



**Fig. 3.** Side A of the Filippovka sword (after YABLONSKY 2010, fig. 12).

The sword under study was found inside Barrow 4 of the Filippovka cemetery<sup>11</sup> (Ilek region, Orenburg district), pertaining to grave 2, which contained the single burial of a man lying on his back with his head facing south (Fig. 2). Inside the kurgan, five other individual tombs were found and above all a sort of sacrificial area immediately adjacent to the mound, where animal skins, the legs of four large predatory quadrupeds, and the skeleton of a predatory bird, perhaps a hawk or an eagle, came to light. In addition, bronze fragments and fragments of bone horse harnesses were found, some of which were decorated in animalistic style. Altogether nearly 200 objects were found in the outer part of the mound alone. Two illegal trenches had been excavated in the kurgan. The kurgan's roof consisted of 7 to 10 layers of radially arranged logs; these had been burnt in antiquity, perhaps the consequence of a ritual.

Grave 2 was in a rectangular pit more than three metres deep. It was determined from the bone remains that it contained a man between the age of 50 and 55 and it was interpreted as a warrior's grave. The grave goods included an iron chain mail in the south-eastern corner of the tomb, while in the south-west corner a spearhead was found stuck vertically into the floor of the grave-cut. The wooden shaft was not preserved. A pair of gold neck rings rested on the dead man's chest. The rings' terminations were decorated with figurines of



**Fig. 4.** Three details of the Filippovka sword (after YABLONSKY 2014, fig. 5).

<sup>11</sup> The burial ground and grave goods excavated by L.T. Yablonsky have been the subject of several publications. See: YABLONSKY 2010, 129-143, 2013, 104-125, 2014, 27-38.



**Fig. 5.** Close-up view of the decoration of the blade on Side B of the Filippovka sword (after YABLONSKY 2010, fig.13).

crouched predatory felines that were interpreted as lions. The sword studied in this paper was found on its side, with the hilt in the right hand of the grave's occupant. The tip of the sword rested on two hundred arrowheads of different types together with some *tamga*<sup>12</sup>, a circumstance that this might have been a series of objects collected as the result of clashes with other nomads, but who belonged to the same cultural area. Also, another funerary object found near the dead man's left elbow resembled a "cup" in gold with a circular hole in the centre, an artefact whose interpretation remains uncertain<sup>13</sup>. A gold buckle with the figure of a crouching tiger was placed directly above this object<sup>14</sup>. The deceased had been placed on a layer of grass that covered the entire floor of the grave<sup>15</sup>.

### THE FILIPPOVKA SWORD: MORPHOLOGY AND DIMENSIONS

The sword found inside Burial 2 in Barrow 4 of the Filippovka cemetery may be considered an *akinakes* due to its morphological characteristics. The sword consists of an ellipsoidal pommel with the back flattened but above all the guard characterized by the curvilinear elements typical of the *akinakes* sword. However, the dimensions should be emphasized: the entire length of the sword including the handle is 57 cm. The pommel of the handle is 6 cm wide and about 1.9 cm high, and the handle is 2.7 cm wide and 7.2 cm long from the curve of the guard to the end part. The width of the guard is 9.6 cm, while the thickness in the central point is 2.9 cm. The blade is about 45 cm long, about 7.3 cm across at the point of maximum width and about 1.7 cm wide near the tip. The figured areas of the blade measure approximately 2.3 cm, while the width of the central gold ribbed portion is 1.8 cm (Fig. 4-5).

<sup>12</sup> DARAGAN 2020: 249-251.

<sup>13</sup> For an interpretation of the object as a shield boss, please refer to YABLONSKY 2010, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Some objects decorated in gold and silver from the burial ground have been the subject of archaeometric analyses for which see SHEMAKHANSKAYA *et alii* 2009, 211-220, ZAYKOV *et alii* 2018, 1290-1305.

<sup>15</sup> YABLONSKY 2010, 136-137.

### ANALYSIS OF THE ICONOGRAPHY

#### The distinction between "figures" and "scenes"

A first subdivision of the iconographic apparatus of Filippovka's sword was carried out by defining a macro-grouping into "scenes", with sub-division into "figures". The scenes may be composed of one or more figures and were numbered progressively but starting again from 1 on either side of the blade. Although the definition of the figures is quite simple, it is much more complex to group them together to form scenes. This aspect is connected to the fact that the object's decoration does not follow a continuous narration from scene to scene. The scenes are in fact single elements made up of a few figures that relate to each other. The most frequent type of representation is a predation scene involving two animals, generally easily definable because one is the prey and the other the predator. The representations of human figures are also well defined because they alternate with depictions of predation or other scenes. On the other hand, the definition of moving animals or single figures is more complex. In these cases it was preferred to isolate the scenes on the basis of preceding or subsequent representations. Overall, 22 scenes (12 on Side A and 10 on Side B) and 44 figures (23 on Side A and 21 on Side B) were isolated on the blade. It was not possible to use the same method of analysis for the representations on the hilt that involve a continuum of animal figures revolving around a single scene (Fig. 6-7).

#### Sword hilt

The hilt has the typical shape of an *akinakes*, decorated with figures that are highly stylized. The figures, geometric or animal, completely fill the space, with a clear element of *horror vacui*. On the guard of Side A, despite the stylization, at least four animal figures can be recognized, two on the right side and two on the left side, two of which are larger and occupy the entire decorated surface. Among these, on the left side a crouched horse can be recognized, beside which there is the front part of a crouched goat with a large, curved horn. On the right side, a boar standing on all fours may be

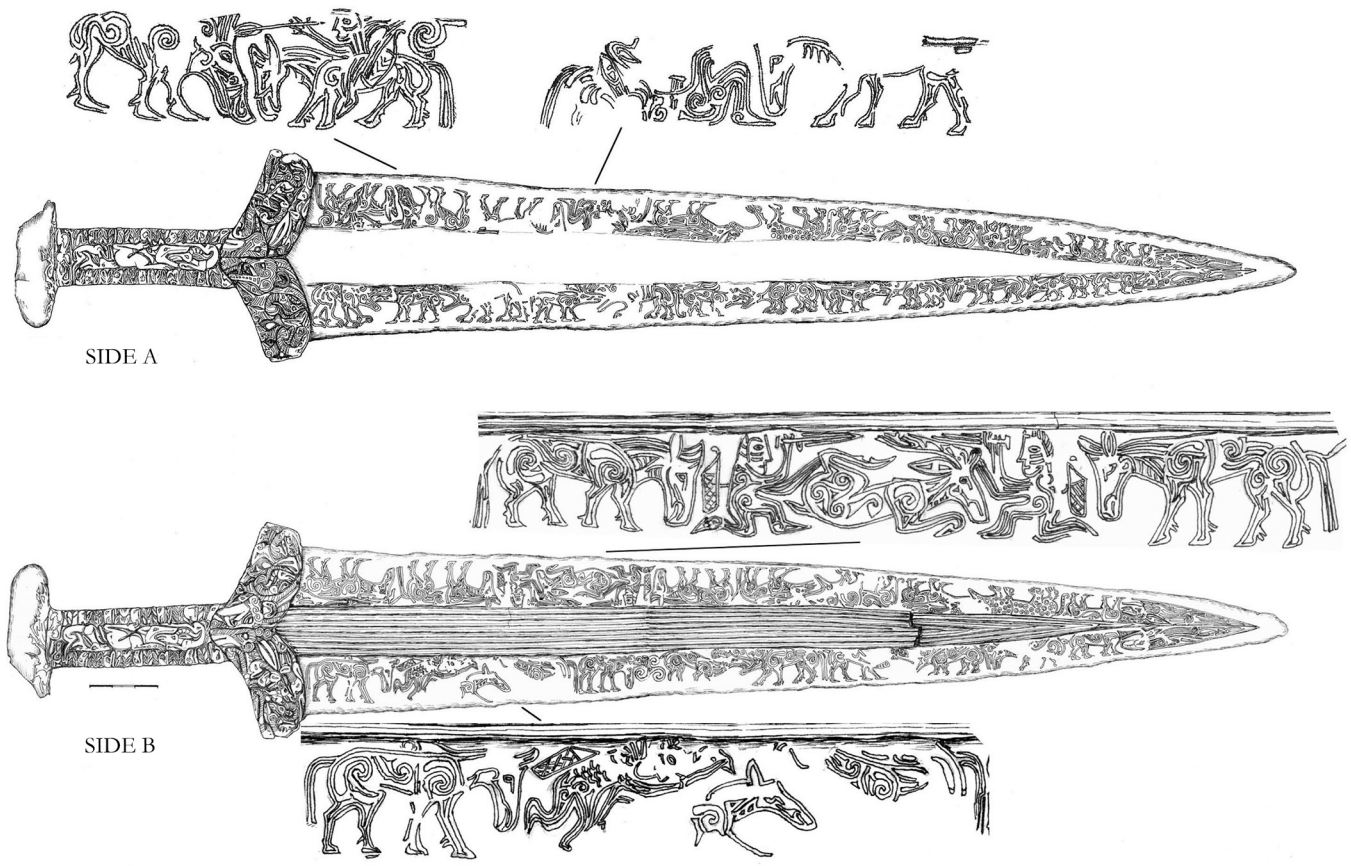


Fig. 6. Drawings of both sides of the sword (after RUKAVISHNIKOVA 2011, fig. 1).

SIDE A

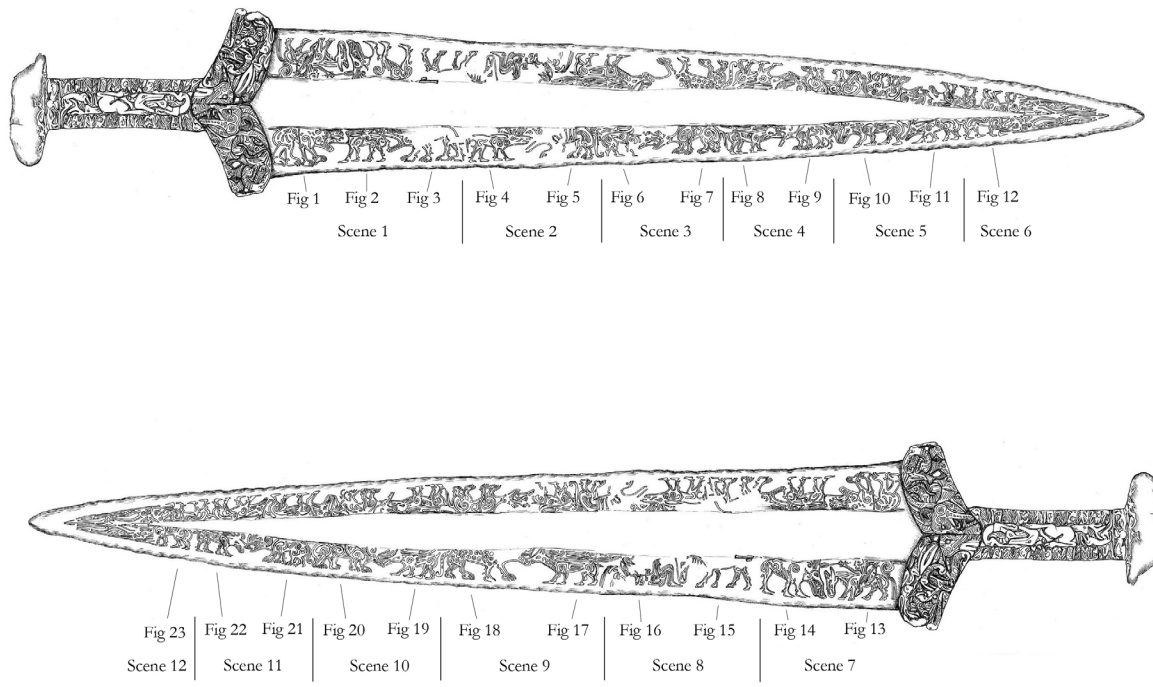


Fig. 7. Drawing of Side A of the sword with indication of the various scenes.

recognized, and the representation of another animal that is too stylized to be identified. The heads of the horse and boar converge and are adjacent to each other. In the central part of the grip, within a rectangular space, four animal figures can be recognized with margins decorated with presumed phytomorphic elements. The animals are depicted in pairs; those closest to the pommel interact with each other but are too stylized to be defined. The main part of the decorative panel, that facing the guard, instead features an animal, clearly a predator and perhaps a wolf, in the act of preying on a goat with a large, curved horn. The guard of Side B features symmetrical mirror-image representations of a wild boar and (probably) a horse. Within the figure, a hardly recognizable number of heads and bodies of goats with curved horns can be distinguished, probably at least four. A wild boar may also be recognized, as well as two animals in twisted positions, perhaps another goat and a horse. Side B has a central representation that is substantially the same as that on Side A.

### Side A

On Side A, a total of 12 scenes characterized by a total of 23 figures have been identified for both cutting edges. In most cases, the scenes are representations of animal predation, i.e. carnivores attacking other animals, basically herbivores. Also relevant are the two scenes with human figures, to the interpretation of which we will return later (Fig. 8).

Scene 1: predation scene. Two larger animals are represented in the act of biting a smaller animal in the centre.

Fig. 1: bear.

Fig. 2: wild boar.

Fig. 3: bear.

Scene 2: predation scene. A larger animal is represented in the act of biting a probable herbivore/omnivore.

Fig. 4: deer/wild boar (?)

Fig. 5: feline

Scene 3: predation scene. A larger animal is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

Fig. 6: wild boar (?)

Fig. 7: feline (?)

Scene 4: predation scene. Perhaps the prey is a herbivore/omnivore.

Fig. 8: deer/wild boar (?)

Fig. 9: bear (?)

Scene 5: scene with animals, probably herbivores/omnivores.

Fig. 10: wild boar

Fig. 11: wild boar

Scene 6: terminal scene with an incoming animal, probably a herbivore/omnivore, and geometric motifs that conclude the decoration near the tip of the blade.

Fig. 12: wild boar/deer (?)

Scene 7: hunting scene. A man on horseback armed with a bow, arrows and spear is represented in the act of attacking a wild boar.

Fig. 13: man on horseback with bow, arrow, and spear.

Fig. 14: wild boar.

Scene 8: scene of difficult interpretation featuring a human figure probably in a supine position with folded legs and a horse.

Fig. 15: horse.

Fig. 16: human figure in supine position with bent legs.

Scene 9: predation scene. A leopard is represented in the act of biting an animal, probably a herbivore/omnivore.

Fig. 17: wild boar (?)

Fig. 18: snow leopard.

Scene 10: predation scene. A larger animal, probably a carnivore, is represented in the act of biting another animal, perhaps a wild boar.

Fig. 19: wild bear.

Fig. 20: bear.

Scene 11: predation scene. A larger animal, probably a carnivore, is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

Fig. 21: feline (?)

Fig. 22: wild boar (?)

Scene 12: a terminal scene with an incoming animal, probably a herbivore, and geometric motifs that conclude the decoration near the tip of the blade.

Fig. 23: deer (?)

### Side B

Side B features a total of 10 scenes with a total of 21 figures (Fig. 9). In this case too, most of the representations are animal predation scenes, although the presence of two scenes with complex human figures should be noted; on this side there is a scene with more complex human figures that involves a greater number of iconographic elements (scene 7, which alone has 6 figures) (Fig. 10).

Scene 1: a complex scene with human figures. A human figure armed with a quiver, therefore with a bow and arrow, is represented in the act of jumping on an animal, probably a horse; it is probably a domestication scene.

Fig. 1: horse.

Fig. 2: human figure armed with a quiver, thus with a bow and arrow, and probably a blade.

Fig. 3: horse.

Scene 2: walking herbivorous animal and geometric triple spiral motif.

Fig. 4: deer with *triskelion*

SIDE A



Scene 1



Scene 2



Scene 3



Scene 4



Scene 5



Scene 6



Scene 7



Scene 8



Scene 9



Scene 10



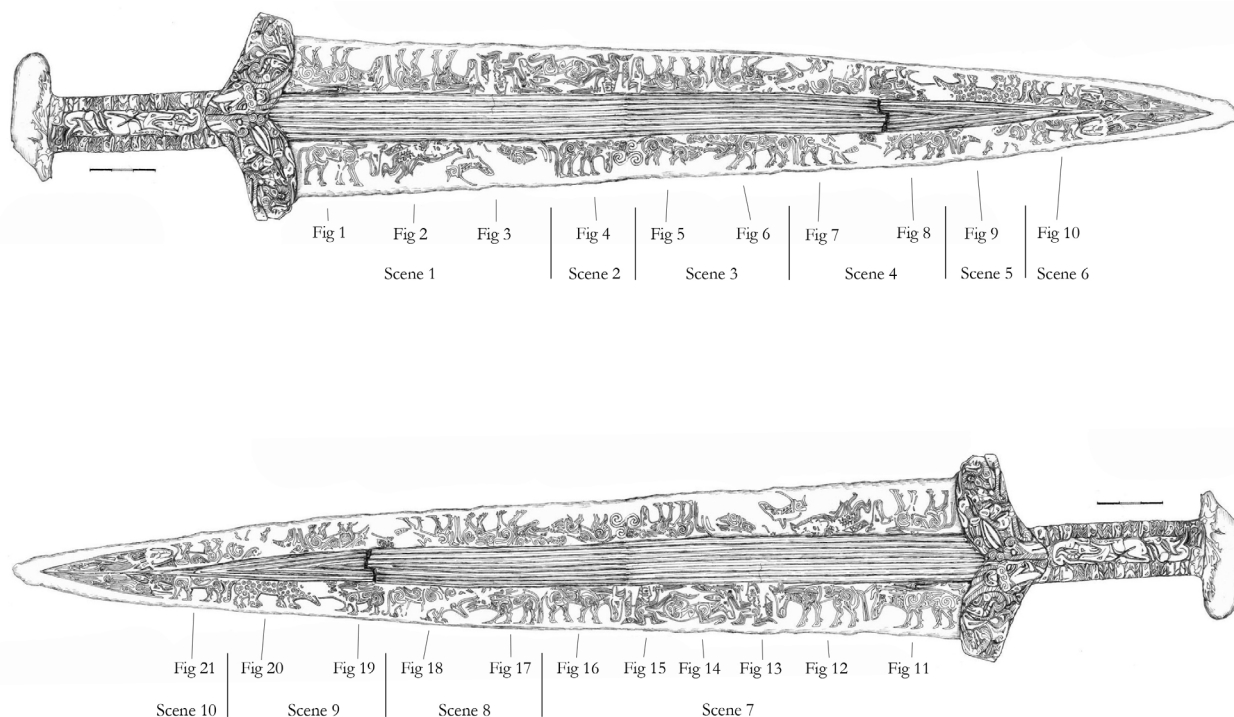
Scene 11



Scene 12

Fig. 8. The single scenes depicted on Side A of the sword.

SIDE B



**Fig. 9.** Drawing of Side B of the sword with indication of the various scenes.

Scene 3: predation scene. A larger animal, a carnivore, is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

- Fig. 5: deer (?)
- Fig. 6: feline.

Scene 4: predation scene. A larger animal, a carnivore, is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

- Fig. 7: deer/wild boar (?)
- Fig. 8: feline

Scene 5: scene with single animal walking.

- Fig. 9: wild boar (?)

Scene 6: terminal scene with an incoming animal, probably a herbivore, and geometric motifs that conclude the decoration near the tip of the blade.

- Fig. 10: deer/wild boar (?)

Scene 7: the most complex and detailed scene of the sword, which has also the greatest number of figures. Two human figures with quiver and probable *akinakes* are represented in the probable action of sacrificing a deer. The scene is framed by the figures of two horses and a probable boar.

- Fig. 11: wild boar (?)
- Fig. 12: horses
- Fig. 13: human figure with *akinakes* and quiver
- Fig. 14: deer with *triskelion* decoration

- Fig. 15: human figure with *akinakes* and quiver
- Fig. 16: horse

Scene 8: predation scene. A larger animal, a carnivore, is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

- Fig. 17: deer (?) – perhaps with craftsman’s error given the length of the tail.
- Fig. 18: feline.

Scene 9: predation scene. A snow leopard is represented in the act of biting a smaller animal.

- Fig. 19: wild boar/deer (?)
- Fig. 20: snow leopard.

Scene 10: terminal scene with an incoming animal, probably a herbivore, and geometric motifs that conclude the decoration near the tip of the blade.

- Fig. 21: deer.

**Representation of preyed animals**

In this section, all the different categories of animals and human figures represented on the sword are considered singly, so as to briefly present the main morphological characteristics of the different figures responsible for the interpretations made. It must be said that the imperfect preservation of some parts of the sword and the complexity of the iconography, characterized by an evident sense

SIDE B



Scene 1



Scene 2



Scene 3



Scene 4



Scene 5



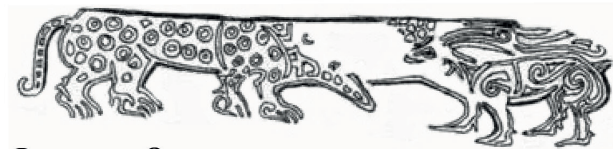
Scene 6



Scene 7



Scene 8



Scene 9



Scene 10

Fig. 10. The single scenes depicted on Side B of the sword.

of *horror vacui*, precludes in some cases establishing an unequivocal interpretation with certainty.

Horse representations abound on Side B and present a highly recognizable and distinctive body morphology that allow them to be identified without major doubts. The coat is generally disproportionate to the development of the body, with a stylized characterization with short schematic strokes. The part of the mane and ears can be recognized as stylized. In general, they have hooves of quite realistic shape and proportion that are shorter than those of wild boars. In most cases, they have two elements only present in horse representations, along with the presence of a long tail that curves downwards and practically reaches the ground. Wild boars are found both on Side A and B and are represented with rather stocky bodies and heads disproportionate to the body, with a clearly recognizable morphology that allows them to be recognized as *Suidae*. The representations show a rather expanded thorax, while the body is smaller in correspondence to the hind limbs. Above all, a characteristic element is the presence of a small tail very similar to real specimens. A clearly emphasized typical feature is the foot, which has a realistic long hoof together with a sort of adherent rear protrusion. The representations would seem to depict two types of deer that are substantially distinguished, one being characterized by the presence of the peculiar *triskelion* symbol and the other not. In general, two deer with *triskelion* have been identified on Side B of the sword; the one in scene 2 presents the *triskelion* in direct association with a downwards-tilted head from which stylized horns branch off and are compressed for reasons of space. The characterizations of the hoof involve the presence of legs that are shorter than those of wild boars and are not present on the animal in scene 2. The second cervid with the *triskelion* is that in scene 7, where the animal is seen on the ground in an unnatural position with the rear part of its body rotated upwards, characterized by a short tail and a *triskelion* attached directly to its hind leg. In addition to the stylized horns, we note the presence of a long ear characterized by two mirror-image triangles inside. Two other deer, that in scene 9 not completely preserved, and that in scene 10 whose head becomes an integral part of the decoration of the tip, have morphological characteristics similar to the specimens described above.

### Representation of predatory animals

The previous discussion of predated animals is followed by an examination of predators. The animals identified as bears have a rather stocky body, no tail, large paws with claws and head morphology which, although schematized, is clearly bear-shaped. They are always represented clearly involved in combat and predation. Bears seem to be almost always associated with wild boars. The representations of the snow leopard are probably the most characteristic and easily recognizable, thanks to their spots, long-curved tail and claws at the end of their legs. They are found on both Sides A and B and in both representations are in the act of attacking a deer; in both scenes, the feline's head is not well preserved, although the wide-open jaws can be easily recognized. Other predators can be identified as felines

due to their morphological characteristics, but the state of conservation of these figures does not allow for more precise attribution. An unusual detail is that the probable feline in scene 11 would seem to have a *triskelion* on one side, which would otherwise seem to be a symbol typical of deer, or in any case predated animals.

### Representation of human figures

The representations of human figures are among the most interesting and appear in a total of four scenes and five representations. The fact that the scenes with human figures are evenly distributed, two on one side and two on the other, is significant – and probably connected to the basic compositional planning involved in sword making. On Side A of the sword, scene 7 undoubtedly represents hunting: a man on horseback is seen throwing a spear or a javelin, and is equipped with a typical Scythian quiver. The morphology of the quiver, although schematic, refers quite precisely to those represented in the reliefs of Persepolis; it would seem to be a “*gorytos*”, that is a quiver that contained both arrows and the bow. From this stylized representation, it is not possible to say whether the upper curvilinear element was relevant to closure as represented in Persepolis, or rather whether it is the terminal part of the bow. The other depiction on Side A is unfortunately poorly preserved and enigmatic, but in any case, a human figure lying with its back on the ground may be recognized; it seems to have crossed legs and might be in a resting position or wounded<sup>16</sup>. Other representations can be found on Side B; in scene 1 a human figure with a quiver seems to be represented in the act of jumping onto the back of a running horse. In scene 7 there are two mirrored kneeling figures, each depicted holding a deer in one hand and a weapon that could be interpreted as an *akinakes* in the other<sup>17</sup>. Both figures carry to the rear a *gorytos* resting on the ground. The type of representation suggests that the figures do not have headdresses, but appear to be bareheaded.

In conclusion, it may be said that out of the total of 44 figures represented, 11 wild boars are certainly identifiable, together with 4 figures which might instead be deer. 6 unidentifiable felines, 6 horses and 6 deer follow in equal numbers. Then there are 5 human figures, 4 bears, 2 snow leopards and an unrecognizable figure.

### ANALYSIS OF THE DECORATIVE THEMES

On Side A, the scenes are all different except for bear + wild boar and feline + deer/wild boar. On Side B the most frequent scene is deer + feline which appears twice.

Overall, the same scene does not appear more than twice, although some animals are currently unidentified.

Given the occurrence of deer/wild boar + feline in complex scenes and the occurrence of deer + feline on Side B, it is likely that the most common association is deer + feline,

<sup>16</sup> A famous representation on a gold plate that is probably part of a belt belonging to the so-called “Siberian Collection of Peter the Great” preserved at the State Hermitage Museum shows male and female human figures resting in the shade of a tree, see: SCHILTZ 1994, 241, Cat. 177.

<sup>17</sup> The general morphological characteristics of the hilt and the length of the blade would, in fact, seem to indicate that this object is a genuine *akinakes*.

also given the fact that on Side A many of the deer/wild boar are not clearly distinguishable; perhaps these are also deer<sup>18</sup>.

In all, four scenes were identified in which images of human beings appear. On Side A of the belt, Scene 7 can undoubtedly be interpreted as a hunting scene, with a human equipped with a spear or javelin and a *gorytos* intent on hitting a boar.

The second scene is again found on Side A: scene 8, which is the most enigmatic and difficult to interpret – both for the theme itself and its fragmentation and poor state of preservation. It appears to represent a man dismounted from a horse sitting on the ground, as suggested by the posture of the crossed legs. It is possible that he is injured; however, if this were the case, the causal link would be missing, that is, the scene that would explain this condition. The “Scythian dismounted and sleeping” motif would seem to be an iconographic motif attested in various productions not only related to the Scythian world. For example, this theme is present in the Painter of the Agora Chairias Cups, specifically on the Cups ARV 177 specimen kept at the Antikenmuseum Basel, where a person dressed in items that identify him as a sleeping Scythian is clearly represented. Also important is the *rhyton* that is shown under the human figure. Probably the theme is related to the phenomenon of the royal *hestiai*, that the presence in the field of a figure considered a substitute for a king, as mentioned by Y. Ustinova<sup>19</sup>. On Side B there are two other images with human figures. That in Scene 1 shows a man in the act of jumping from a running horse, an image framed by two other horses placed at the edge of the scene. The interpretation that is proposed is that it represents a moment during the training of horses. The last human occurrence is in Scene 7 which is the most complex of the entire sword as it involves six different figures. In the central part, the heart of the depiction shows two men, each equipped with a sword that could be an *akinakes*, and two *gorytoi* in the act of striking a deer held on the ground by the two figures. The scene might depict a ritual killing. On either side of these are two symmetrical, mirror-image horses and at the right end of the representation a single wild boar. It may be hypothesized that those who decorated this sword wished to represent four different moments in the life of the community to which the sword’s owner belonged, regardless of his role in the community which most likely was important. This decorative cycle was interpreted by Yablonsky as several events relating to the life and death of a warrior and is dated to the second half of the fifth or fourth century BC<sup>20</sup>.

### THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SWORD IN THE CONTEXT OF ANIMAL STYLE ICONOGRAPHY

Filippovka’s sword is one of the most iconographically representative objects of a specific kind of iconography

<sup>18</sup> The iconographic motif of the predation of deer and wild boar, or more generally of herbivores, seems to be quite consolidated within Scythian gold productions. The presence of both scenes is significant; one in which the predator is a snow leopard is also present on the famous fish-shaped gold object from the Vetersfelde treasure kept in the Altes Museum in Berlin, see: FURTWÄENGLER 1883, Taf. I.1.

<sup>19</sup> USTINOVA 1999, 72.

<sup>20</sup> YABLONSKY 2014, 30-31, fig. 5.

typical of the steppes usually referred to as “animal style”<sup>21</sup>. This specific definition was introduced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by M. Rostovtzeff<sup>22</sup> in an attempt to define a vast panorama of iconographies depicted on a great variety of distinctive objects in the steppes cultural area. An advance in the study of animal style was certainly reached with the cataloguing and systematization of iconographic motifs carried out by E. Korolkova<sup>23</sup>. In this section, starting from previous studies on the subject, we will try to contextualize the animal depictions on the Filippovka sword by means of a series of comparisons with finds from the Eurasian steppes. The large number of representations, as well as the high degree of stylization that in some cases is found in figures on swords allows parallels to be drawn only for the most significant and characteristic elements. The depiction of the wild boar shows precise parallels with the iconographies depicted on a gold plate, an integral part of a wooden vase, found on another mound in the Filippovka necropolis, dated to the 5th-4th centuries BC<sup>24</sup>. The wild boar motif is found quite frequently in the lower Volga area, while in the southern Urals area the same representation has been found mainly in one of the Filippovka mounds<sup>25</sup>. Another characteristic element of the art of the steppes is the *triskelion*, in some cases interpreted as the stylized representation of the heads of birds of prey or griffins shown in rotation<sup>26</sup>. On another object from Filippovka Barrow I, the handle of a gold vase, there is a stylized representation of a bear; despite some iconographic differences, it appears to be one of the most pertinent parallels concerning representations of these animals on swords<sup>27</sup>. With regard to representations of horses, similar images are present on an ivory or bone plaque dated to the 5th-4th centuries BC from Sagly-Bazhi II cemetery, and material from Barrow 13<sup>28</sup> and Barrow 8<sup>29</sup>, and the area of Tuva.

### THE FILIPPOVKA SPECIMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF CEREMONIAL AKINAKAI

#### *Akinakai* of the Ural region and Orenburg group

The Volga-Ural region is the largest in Europe in terms of area, but with regard to the number of Scythian swords and daggers discovered, it ranks third in Eurasia (377 items; 22.9%), after the Northern Black Sea region (458; 27.8%) and the Caucasus (382; 23.2%)<sup>30</sup>. More than half of the *akinakai* of the Volga-Urals were found in burial mounds (200 items, 52.9%) or were stray finds (150 items, 40.2%)<sup>31</sup>, mainly in the Bashkiria local group where stray finds account for no less than 96% of all known Scythian period swords and daggers (Fig.1). *Akinakai* in flat burials have been

<sup>21</sup> JETTMAR 1964, BUNKER *et alii* 1970, BRENTJES 1982, SCHILZ 1994.

<sup>22</sup> ROSTOVZEFF 1922.

<sup>23</sup> KOROLKOVA 2006.

<sup>24</sup> KOROLKOVA 2006, tab. 10.1.

<sup>25</sup> KOROLKOVA 2006, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding other examples of Scythian *triskeles* see KOROLKOVA 2006, tab. 26.

<sup>27</sup> KOROLKOVA 2006, 37.4.

<sup>28</sup> KOROLKOVA 2006, 16.3.

<sup>29</sup> GRACH 1967, 215-233.

<sup>30</sup> TOPAL 2021, fig. 1, 2; tab. 1.

<sup>31</sup> TOPAL 2021, tab. 5.

found in Transuralia, and within the Volga-Kama group in the territory of the Ananyino culture some finds were discovered in settlements and sanctuaries. The vast majority of *akinakai* of the Orenburg group (62 items; 93.9%), to which the Filippovka-I burial ground belongs, were found in burial mounds; a further four items (6.1%) are stray or poorly documented finds. The chronological distribution of the Volga-Ural swords and daggers as a whole corresponds to general European trends: most of the *akinakai* belong to the end of the Middle Scythian period, early – third quarter of the 5th century BC (169 items; 44.8%), slightly less to the Classical period, last quarter of the 5th – late 4th century BC (155 items; 41.1%) and very little to the Early Scythian period, early 7th – early 6th century BC (27 items; 7.2%) and the beginning of the Middle Scythian, second half of the 6th century BC (26; 6.9%). This brings the Volga-Ural region closer to the neighbouring European areas such as the Volga-Don and the North Black Sea but distinguishes it from the nearest Asian ones like Kazakhstan and Siberia, for example. The earliest Scythian period *akinakai* in the Volga-Ural region are found in the Volga-Kama and Transuralia, where early nomad weapons are known from the pre-Scythian period. Early Scythian *akinakai* are also found in the Samara group, and less often in the Magnitogorsk, Orsk and Perm groups, but are absent in Bashkiria, north of the Aral Sea and the Orenburg group. In the Orenburg group, there are neither swords nor daggers of the early Middle Scythian period, while most of the *akinakai* belong to the Classical period of the late 5th – 4th centuries BC.

### Ceremonial swords of Eurasia

In the Filippovka-I burial ground, 23 swords and daggers have been discovered<sup>32</sup>; five items were decorated with gold, *i.e.* ceremonial *akinakai*. From Eurasian territory at least 69 Scythian period swords and daggers decorated with gold are known. The geographical distribution of ceremonial swords and daggers is uneven: 44 ceremonial swords and daggers, almost two-thirds (64%), come from the Northern Black Sea region, seven (10%) from each of Southern Siberia and the Volga-Ural region, four items (6%) from the territory of the Caucasus and Central Asia, one from each of China, Iran and Central Europe<sup>33</sup>. The chronological distribution of *akinakai* in the European part of the area is close to normal; most of the finds belong to the latter part of the Middle Scythian period (late 6th – early 5th century BC). The tradition of decorating swords with gold in the nomadic milieu probably appeared shortly before the emergence of the Scythian *akinakes* itself. At the same time, most of the ceremonial forms are associated with Classical Scythian culture, and the peak occurs in the final phase in the second half (or even the third quarter) of the 4th century BC. However, in many cases there are signs of “chronological delay” of the ceremonial items, which is also characteristic of other prestige items.

Less than half of the Scythian *akinakai* from the European area are “stray” finds (663 out of 1645, 40%), and in the various regions this figure fluctuates from 25 to

60%. However, almost all finds of ceremonial swords are associated with aristocratic barrows, including some of the “stray finds”, which presumably come from destroyed or plundered Scythian mounds. Apparently, the closest practice of conspicuous consumption by Iranian nomads concerns their funerary use, for which the weapon was turned into a ceremonial object (and, as a rule, covered with a thin gold leaf). It is clear that the Iranian ceremonial weapons found, apart from in burials like the treasures from Ziyiye, Oxus and Vetersfelde, come from outside the nomadic world, and possibly mark its boundaries in certain periods.

The tradition of ceremonial swords as grave goods pulsates throughout the history of the Iranian-speaking nomads. It appears already at the end of the Pre-Scythian period, in the context of the fading practice of placing swords and daggers in hoards known from the Late Bronze Age. Then the tradition is clearly manifested in the Scythian era and after a short break was again revived in the Sarmatian culture of the late 3rd – early 2nd centuries BC. In Scythian times, the tradition of ceremonial swords was accompanied by chronological gaps between the main episodes (in the early 7th, early 6th, and late 5th centuries BC). Although the maximum number of Scythian swords and daggers falls during the Middle Scythian period, the bulk of the ceremonial forms belong to the end of the Classical Scythian culture. This period, with huge royal mounds and an abundance of gold, perfectly illustrates the thesis that conspicuous consumption coincides with periods of political instability. And indeed, following the period of the maximum spread of ceremonial *akinakai* in the third quarter of the 4th century, literally one generation later we observe the complete disappearance of the Classical Scythian culture, along with its typical weapons, horse harnesses and animal style.

### Ceremonial sword from Burial 2, Barrow 4 Filippovka-I. Typology and chronology

Swords from the Filippovka-I burial ground are mainly represented by *akinakai* characteristic of the Classical period, *e.g.* the Solokha type of the late 5th – first third of the 4th century BC<sup>34</sup> or Chertomlyk type of the third quarter of the 4th century BC<sup>35</sup>. But the ceremonial swords from Barrow 1 and Burial 2 of Barrow 4 are rather associated with the late Middle Scythian period. The item from Barrow 1, judging by the design of the pommel with the opposing griffins, belongs to the Issyk type, widespread in Eurasia in the second half of the 6th century BC<sup>36</sup>. In addition to the Volga-Urals – the westernmost part of the area, such swords were most popular in Zhetysu (Seven Rivers), Western Siberia and Northern China. On the basis of chronological features, it may be concluded that “griffin” daggers appeared in the wide expanses of the Scythian world no earlier than the middle of the 6th century BC and continued for over a century. At the same time, the latest items, dated to the 5th and even 4th centuries BC, are ceremonial forms, which are usually characterized by some chronological delay. Ceremonial griffin swords are associated with three regions: the Volga-

<sup>32</sup> FRIZEN/YABLONSKY 2017, 111, tab. 1.

<sup>33</sup> TOPAL 2021, 69, fig. 23.

<sup>34</sup> TOPAL 2020, 635–639.

<sup>35</sup> TOPAL 2014, 136.

<sup>36</sup> TOPAL 2020, 634.

Ural, Zhetysu and South Siberia. The extreme western periphery like the Volga-Urals can be considered a source of further evolution of griffin daggers and their subsequent penetration into the Black Sea and Danube regions in their changed form. Most likely the original territory where the canons of griffin dagger's image and morphology were formed were the Altai, Tuva and the Khakass-Minusinsk Basin.

On the basis of its morphology, the sword from Burial 2, Barrow 4 can be attributed to the Cozia type of the end of the Middle Scythian period. At this time many features took form which then determined the appearance of the swords and daggers of the Classical period. These include an oval pommel, transverse notches on the shaft of the hilt, and longitudinal grooves on the blade and hilt. However, although in Classical times swords and daggers became "lighter" due to the thinning of the handle (often forged together with pommel and hilt), in the Middle Scythian the *akinakai* still retained their massiveness. Features such as an oval pommel, a flat handle and a butterfly-shaped hilt allowed Alexandru Vulpe to distinguish the Cozia type<sup>37</sup>. *Akinakai* of the Cozia type perhaps constitute the most representative and widespread group of Scythian artefacts in the European part of the area. In addition, we have many well-dated assemblages at our disposal. The type is mainly concentrated in the east of the Danube region and covers the steppe part of the North Black Sea region and the Crimea, Ciscaucasia, the Southern Urals and Transuralia. Even though this type appeared in the 6th century BC and is known until the turn of the 5th-4th centuries BC, the bulk of the burials belong to the first half of the 5th century BC, closer to the first quarter of the 5th century. At the same time, most of the early burials of the 6th century BC are associated with the Caucasus. In the Ural region, *akinakai* of the Cozia type are concentrated mainly south of the Ural Mountains, but the burials are dated no earlier than the mid-5th century BC, with some from the early 4th century BC<sup>38</sup>. The most eastern Cozia-type finds are extra-long swords from burials (53 and 59) in the South Tagisken burial ground<sup>39</sup> of the 6th-5th centuries BC, one of which was also decorated with gold plates. Thus, the eastern specimens are dated later than the Black Sea, Caucasian and Danube items. However, the chronological "delay" indicates that these valuable weapons could be kept for a long time, passed down from generation to generation. It is therefore not surprising that the ceremonial sword from Burial 2, Barrow 4 of Filippovka-I, generally dated to the first half – middle of the 5th century BC, is associated with other items of the late 5th century BC.

## CONCLUSION

The sword from the Filippovka necropolis is undoubtedly one of the most interesting objects among recent discoveries referable to the cultures of Eurasian steppe nomads. The object is exceptional not so much for its morphology, which conforms to the traditions known

for the cultures of these regions, as for its extraordinary and complex gold decoration which features figurative scenes referable to a symbolic-ritualistic sphere that requires in-depth iconographic analysis to understand its polysemic meaning as originally conceived. For various reasons it may be concluded that the sword most likely had a symbolic-ritualistic value connected to the figure of the person buried with it; however, these did not include observation of the blade's state of preservation, since because it is badly damaged near the cutting edges we were unable to establish whether there were signs of wear. This sword, together with the other grave goods, clearly indicates that the deceased must have played an important role in his community, although obviously it is not possible to establish with certainty whether this role was of a religious or exclusively military nature. Regarding the sword's morphology, on the basis of the comparisons presented above it may be identified as being of the Cozia type, and consequently belongs to the most representative and widespread group of Scythian objects found in the European portion of the steppe area. This type of *akinakes* is attested for the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the tomb was arranged slightly after the main framework. The most interesting aspect, however, concerns the iconographic elements that characterize the sword. As we have seen, the entire decorative system, of both hilt and blade, exhibits a complex style involving of bundles of lines that corresponds to the tradition known in the specialist literature as "animal style". The detailed study of this complex iconography made it possible to isolate at least groups of figures. The first features zoomorphic scenes with clashes between recurring animal figures, carnivorous versus herbivorous. A second group, represented by a single exemplar, is based on a hunting scene and is undoubtedly the most important group referable to a ritualistic-mythological context. This group is composed of three component scenes that show two human figures involved in the ritual sacrifice of a horse with swords that seem to be *akinakes*, not unlike the Filippovka sword, a horse-taming scene and a last one, probably the most important, representing the motif of the "sleeping Scythian". This is a depiction of a ritual slumber that took place during a ceremony in which a substitute ritual king slept in an open field. The sleeping Scythian motif was undoubtedly one of the most widespread in the nomadic steppe culture but is also depicted on vases produced in the Greek world in which figures of armed Scythian men are shown sleeping. The "animal style" is certainly attested from the 8th century BC at least, a circumstance that means that the sword's manufacture was not necessarily contemporary with its context of deposition, but that it could have been produced earlier than the 5th century BC and handed down over time.

<sup>37</sup> VULPE 1990, 43; TOPAL 2021, fig. 66, 68-70, 80-83.

<sup>38</sup> VASILIEV 2001, 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> TOLSTOV/ITINA 1966, fig. 14: 1, 2; 15; 16.

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