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About one of the unique finds of the late pre-Scythian period from the Koban necropolis

The Koban culture is one of the most prominent cultural phenomena in the Caucasus region. Its materials are kept in many European museums and are the subject of interest of a wide scientific community. The Koban assemblages stored in the Vienna Natural History Museum are among the most significant museum collections of the Caucasian antiquities in Europe. This collection was acquired in the 19th century by Franz Heger, director of the anthropological and ethnographical department of the Museum, and includes more than 30 representative burial complexes with highly informative artefacts of the eponymous site Koban *necropolis*. These data are not yet known to researchers. The assemblages from Vienna are unique, because they belonged to the elite members of the society, whose burials included valuable grave goods and burial costume elements. This makes the collection in Vienna a key site to be considered for research questions related to the culture and history of the Central Caucasus between the 10th and 5th centuries BC. The following article is devoted to the analysis of one of the most interesting finds from the Koban cemetery — a bronze pin decorated with the cast figure of a horseman discovered in the burial No. 1 (1884).

Keywords: Vienna Natural History Museum, Caucasian collection, Koban culture, Koban cemetery, graves, 8th century BC, metalworking, bronze pin, horseman, bow.

Introduction

The Koban culture of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages was named after the village of Koban which is located to the southwest of Vladikavkaz in what is today the modern territory of the Republic of North Ossetia. Excavations carried out at the site Koban in the second part of the 19th century are associated with the names of Georgij Filimonoff, Vladimir Antonovich, Rudolf Virchow, Vasilij Dolbezhev, Ernest Chantre, etc. They found thousands of impressive bronze objects, which came into the possession of museums in Tiflis, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Lyon, providing a foundation for their further study.

The Vienna Caucasus Collection is among the largest collections of Bronze and Iron Age in Europe. Some sparse early publications of this material only focus on specific artefacts or summaries [1; 272–276], but the main part of the prehistoric Caucasus finds kept at the the Vienna Natural History Museum Vienna never has been presented to the scientific community.

This article is dedicated to the consideration of one of the masterpieces of the metalworking of the Koban culture, namely a pin decorated with a cast figure of a horseman (Fig. 1). It is kept in the Vienna Natural History Museum and comes from the famous Koban cemetery, located in the North Ossetia. Practically all authors who have written about the pin in question, beginning with Praskovya Uvarova [2; 53] and ending with current researchers [3; 4; 68], have erroneously indicated the anonymous “Vienna Museum” as its place of storage, which is not correct. It is also extremely important that the pin in question is not an accidental find, but is associated with an informative archaeological complex — the grave of a warrior horseman (burial No. 1). Its materials came to the Vienna Natural History Museum in 1884. Artefacts from this assemblage are currently being prepared for publication [5], so only the pin will be discussed in this paper.

Materials

The bronze rod-shaped pin with a pointed end and a sculpted pommel depicting a rider is 20.8 cm long. It is made of a rod with a round cross section, which is “decorated” in the upper part with a spherical extension with a through hole. Above this, there is a short, smooth section of the rod passing into a sub-rectangular “pedestal” that tapers in the middle (Fig. 1, 1). Its concave sides are decorated with parallel in-

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cised lines. This “pedestal” ends with two rectangular smooth surfaces joined together in the form of a gable “roof”, which is decorated with vertical notches along the contour of the facade. On this “roof” there is a figure of a rider. The height of the sculptural composition is about 4 cm.



Figure 1. Bronze pin from grave No. 1 (1884) of the Koban necropolis

The horse is small in size, solidly built with a slightly convex chest, stands in a calm pose. Forelegs extended forward. The straight hind legs are marked with hooves and joints (Fig. 2, 2 — 4). There are poorly distinguishable oval-shaped eyes on the forward-extended head with pointed, erect ears. The slender, arched neck shows a mane in the form of a faintly marked narrow stripe. The proportionate body ends in a short, upturned tail.

The rider has a large head, a flat upper part of the body and narrow sloping shoulders (Fig. 2, 2 — 4). The long arms are bent at the elbows. The hands are brought together and placed on the horse's neck. On the left hand, three fingers are marked with indentations. The rider's legs are bent at the knees. The foot is pointed and pressed against the front leg of the animal. The rider's head is turned to the right and the face is raised up. The chin is pointed. The straight brow arches pass into a protruding relief rectangle, indicating a large nose*. The ears are shaped as rounded bulges. The mouth is shown as a straight, short, deepened line. The smooth surface of the lower part of the head is outlined along the perimeter by a recessed contour. A small bow hangs on the rider's waist on the left side. Its lower part is placed in a special bag-like container for bow. This is a typical double-curvature bow with a drawn string. A deepened line is traced along the edge of a bow case (from the string side). On the opposite side of a bow case, where it meets the protruding bow, there is a small sharp-angled protrusion that extends at an angle to the side. Perhaps, this is an image of a reduced cover of the bow container.

Results and Discussion

The pin under consideration belongs to a number of unique works of arts and crafts of the Koban culture. This object has been studied by many researchers who have given different interpretations to its images.

* The face of a rider is depicted in a similar manner on a bronze statuette from burial No. 15 of the Brili cemetery in Georgia, which dates to the Early Scythian period (Fig. 2, 5) [3; 142, kat. 375].

The dating of the pin also varies in these publications from the end of the 2nd millennium BC to the 5th — 4th centuries BC [3; 179; 4; 68; 6; 181; 7; 8; 82]. The frequent errors in the description of this item are largely due to the fact that researchers were unfamiliar with the original artefact and used a photograph published by Praskovya Uvarova in 1900 to analyse a pin [2; tab. XL, 2]. However, even in this first publication there was an inaccuracy, which was pointed out by Franz Hancar in 1932, namely that Uvarova mistook a bow hanging from the rider's waist for a part of the saddle [9; 149]. False are also the statements about the alleged presence of the rider's convex eyes marked with round knobs, the unmarked ears and nose, the lowered right arm, the bow fixed on the rider's right side, etc. [3; 178; 4; 70; 10; 108].

The pin in question is an example of the individual artistic creativity of a local craftsman and has no analogues in any of the cultures of the vast Caucasus region. At the same time, we should mention objects close to it in time (bronze dagger and belt), also decorated with images of horsemen (in the form of sculptures or graphic images). They were found in the Koban culture burial complexes of the North and the South Ossetia: grave No. 37 of the Adaidon burial ground and grave No. 76 of the Tli cemetery (Fig. 2, 1 — 3) [11; tab. 56; 12; fig. 42; 13]. It should be emphasized that the highlands of the Central Caucasus are the main, and so far, only, centre of distribution of pre-Scythian equestrian images in the Koban culture. Remarkably that the Koban burials mentioned above, in which depictions of horsemen were found, also contained various pieces of weaponry, proving that they belonged to warriors.



Figure 2. Figurines, as well as depictions of horsemen and composite bows: 1, 2 – Adaidon cemetery, grave No. 37; 3 – Tli cemetery, grave No. 76; 4 – Sulori; 5 – Brili cemetery, grave No. 15; 6 – Kazbek treasure; 7 – Sevan; 8 – Mouçiyéri; 9 – Astchi blur; 10 – Akhtala [3; 11; 13; 24]

A bronze dagger with a pommel decorated with cast schematic figures of two riders was found in burial No. 37 of the Adaidon burial ground (Fig. 2, 1, 2). The horses have a long, broad neck, tapering to a small, sub-triangular muzzle. The front legs are placed forward, the hind legs are straight. The long tail is positioned along the hind legs. The rounded heads of the riders have two protrusions, one of which marks the nose and the other the chin. The riders' backs are straight and their legs are slightly bent at the knees. The arms are stretched forward, the hands lie at the top of the animal's neck. According to some of the characteristics mentioned above, the equestrian figures from the Adaidon are close to an image of horseman on the Koban pin. The date of burial No. 37 of the Adaidon burial ground is determined within the framework of the middle to second half of the 8th century BC [13; 159].

A chance find of a bronze axe from the vicinity of the Sulori village in western Georgia, the butt of which depicts a sculptural group of two riders probably should be also dated to the same chronological period (Fig. 2, 4) [3; 159]. They presumably hold an arrow in their left hand and a bow in their right hand. On the right shoulder, a quiver is fixed. Unfortunately, the schematic nature of these images does not allow us to determine the details of the design and typological characteristics of above-mentioned weapons. It is also worth mentioning E.E. Kuzmina's point of view, according to which with the emergence of horsemanship in the 1st millennium BC and under nomadic influence, the myth of the twins known to the Caucasian peoples was transformed, and they began to be depicted as horsemen [6; 189].

The image of a rider is also present on a bronze belt from burial No. 76 of the Tli burial ground (Fig. 2, 3). The horse depicted on it is shown in motion. Its large elongated muzzle with "leaf-shaped" ears shows an eye in the form of two circles. The mane is depicted with diagonal lines on the massive neck, while the joints and hooves are highlighted on the legs. The long, probably braided tail is decorated with a zigzag ribbon. The torso of the horse is presumably covered with a blanket, which is decorated with solar signs on the chest. A rider is seated on the horse's back. He has a small beard and his hair is drawn in short lines. The rider's legs are bent at the knees and shown in one plane. The warrior holds a whip and, probably, the reins with his right hand. From the horse's muzzle hangs down a rope with a severed human head. The rider's left arm is extended towards the upper end of the bow. The bow is placed in the goryt, which hangs on the rider's shoulder. On the outside of the goryt there is a special small "pocket" with four arrows inside. Researchers date the bronze belt from Tli burial No. 76 (as well as the chronologically similar belt from burial № 74) to the end of the pre-Scythian (late 8th century BC) or the Early Scythian period (7th century BC) [14; 205; 15; 45; 16; 17; 226].

The riders depicted on the Koban pin and the Tli belt are armed with a small bow of the "Scythian" type that has asymmetrical shoulders, an interception in the middle part and outwardly curved ends (Fig. 1, 3; 2, 3). This bow belongs to the specimens of complex construction and is compared with the ancient Scythian bows depicted on sword scabbards from the Melgunov and Kelermes kurgans [18; 19]. The manufacture of such bows requires a practical knowledge of many laws of ballistics, a fairly high level of technical development, and the ability to carry out the finest processing and bonding of materials. The Eurasian steppes are considered to be the place of origin of the "Scythian" bow, where it was widely used by many peoples in the 1st millennium BC [19; 29, 30; 20; 150,151; 21; 75]. Similar wooden bows of asymmetrical shape were also found in the pre-Scythian sites of the south of Eastern Europe — kurgan No. 2, grave No. 5 near Zimogorya in eastern Ukraine, tomb No. 261 of the cemetery Klin-Yar III in Stavropol region [22; fig. 3; 23; fig. 110, 1, 2]. Warriors armed with bows with curved shoulders and outwardly bent ends, whose outlines resemble nomadic examples of the "Scythian type", are also depicted on some bronze belts from the southern Caucasus — Asthi Blur, Akhtala, Mouçi-yéri, etc (Fig. 2, 7 — 10) [24; 79, figs. 120; 121]. It should be noted that they differ from the Koban and Tli bows mentioned above in that they are much larger and were used by foot soldiers rather than horsemen. A specific form of a "storage" for bows and arrows of the "Scythian" type was a goryt, which consisted of a bow case with a compartment for arrows attached to the outside. Such a goryt is depicted on a bronze belt from burial No. 76 of the Tli cemetery (Fig. 2, 3).

The depictions of the bows on the Koban pin and the Tli belt are realistic, with knowledge of the features and details of their construction, which indicates that the local inhabitants of the Central Caucasus were familiar with this type of weapon, and probably with its direct carriers — early nomads.

It is worth noting, however, that this type of weapon was only truly formidable in combination with the shooting equipment designed for it, in the form of bronze-socketed arrowheads. The inhabitants of the steppes of Eastern Europe (the Cimmerians) mastered the art of making and using these innovations, especially in combination with the use of a riding horse in the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC, which largely ensured their military success on the battlefield [25]. At the same time, the socketed arrowheads were

exotic in the mountainous regions of the Central Caucasus and practically unknown in the burials of the local inhabitants. The “Scythian” bow was therefore for them primarily a symbol of the warrior's prestige and heroic virtue, which is reflected in the spread of its images on objects found in Koban burials, which undoubtedly emphasised the high status of the indigenous Koban elite.

It should be emphasised that depictions of people are quite rare in the art of the Koban Culture, where they are recorded no earlier than the 8th century BC. For example, in the Tli cemetery, where more than 400 burials were investigated, bronze pendants in the form of a female figure and a human head are known only in two cases (burials No. 210, 244) [11; tab. 91, 3; 105, 4; 26; 84, fig. 3, 3]. It is symptomatic that anthropomorphic images, as we have seen in the example of the horsemen, are often correlated with images of horses. In our opinion, this is no coincidence, but reflects the changes in the ideology and social structure of the local Koban society, associated with nomadic, steppe influence and the spread of the prestigious institution of horsemanship in the south of Eastern Europe.

In addition to the depictions of riders, a representative set of horse harness discovered together with a pin in burial No. 1 (1884) of the Koban necropolis, provides convincing evidence of contacts between the Koban population and the nomads of Eastern Europe. It includes bronze stirrup-shaped bits, three-looped cheekpieces with curved end and different-sized flat caps at both terminals, plaques with a slightly convex shield decorated with a solar sign in the form of a rhombus, etc. (Figure. 3, 1, 2, 4, 6).

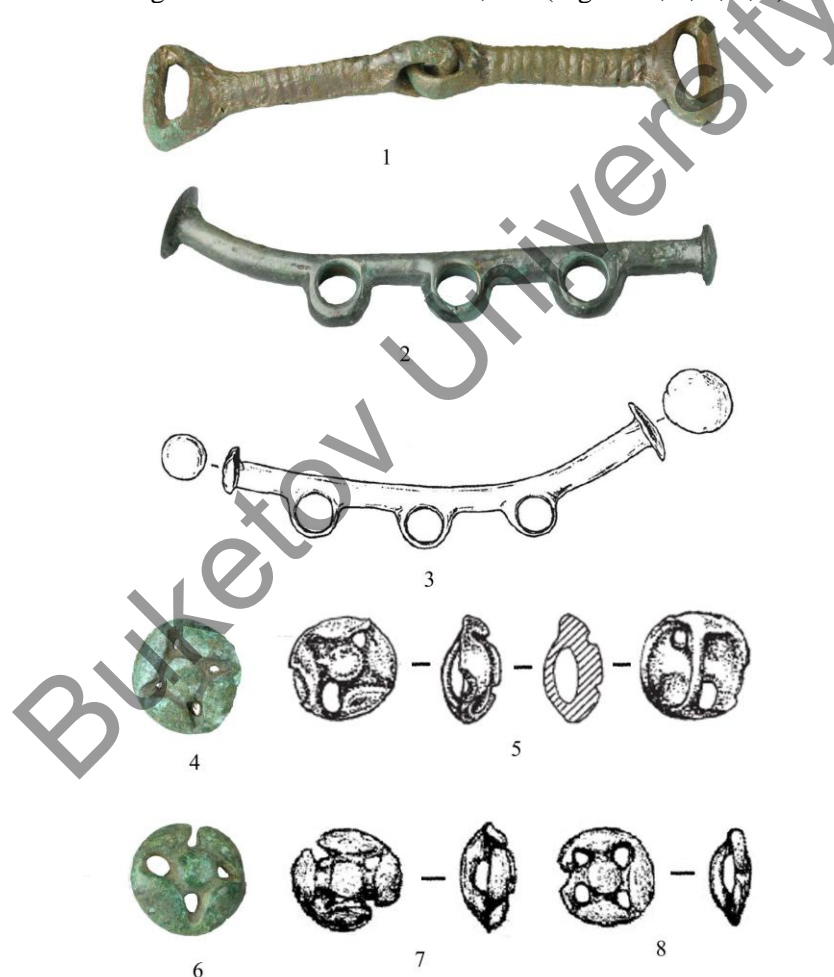


Figure 3. Bridle accessories: 1, 2, 4, 6 – Koban necropolis, grave No. 1 (1884); 3 – Belyaevskiy cemetery; 5 – Klin-Yar III cemetery, burial No. 184; 7, 8 – Elkhotovo cemetery, burial No. 85 [23; 28]

These objects find analogies in such burial grounds as Belyaevskiy, Klin-Yar III (burials No. 184, 186), Elkhotovo (burial No. 85), etc. (Figure. 3, 3, 5, 7, 8) [23; fig. 25, 9; 28, 3; 27; fig. 89, 3, 4; 28; fig. 1, 7 — 9]. The above-mentioned bridle accessories belong to the rather reliable chronological indicators that allow us to date the burial No. 1 with a pin from the Koban burial ground within the framework of the second half — the end of the 8th century BC., and probably early 7th century BC.

It should be noted that among all the necropolises excavated in the Central Caucasus, it is only the Koban burial ground is characterized by numerous and diverse composition of various types of bridle accessories (for example, at least seven different types of metal bits are presented here) (Fig. 4) [29; tab. 30]. This testifies in favor of especially close relations of Koban community with nomads in the pre-Scythian period.

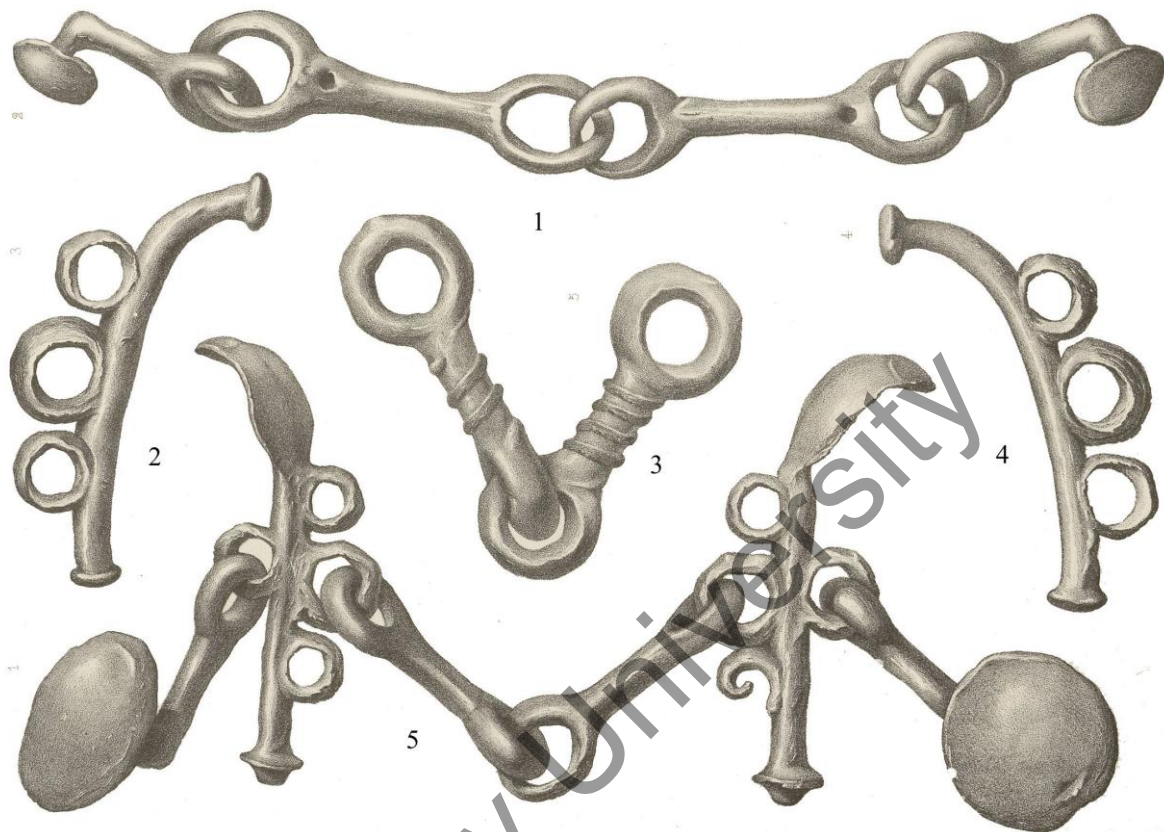


Figure 4. Horse harness from the Koban necropolis [29]

Vera Kovalevskaya's attempt to date the Koban pin on the basis of the “strongly bent” legs of the rider, which presumably have their counterparts on Assyrian reliefs of the 9th century BC does not seem to us to be successful, since the same manner of sitting of the horseman is characteristic for Caucasian images of the 6th — 5th centuries BC, for example the Kazbek treasure (Fig. 2, 6) [7; 65; 3; 310, kat. 309]. It is also worth noting the different degree of bent legs in the synchronous paired figures of riders on the dagger from burial № 37 of the Adaidon cemetery and the pole-top from Dagestan, where in one of the horsemen they are almost straight and in the other they are strongly bent [4; 71, 72]. This example is further evidence that the position of the rider's legs on Caucasian bronze figurines is not a reliable chronological marker, and only the funerary inventory accompanying these images can provide a convincing basis for their dating.

The above-mentioned interactions of the Koban tribes with the early nomads of the late pre-Scythian period do not exclude the possibility that the population of the high mountain regions of the Central Caucasus borrowed some elements of material culture, including bridle sets, from the population of the South Caucasus and the West Asia. This is strongly supported by the original horse equipment found with the image of riders in burial No. 37 of the Adaidon cemetery (Fig. 5) They are represented by a two-piece, single-ring bit with an S-shaped inlet psalias, the ends of which terminate in the heads of canine predators [12; fig. 83; 13].

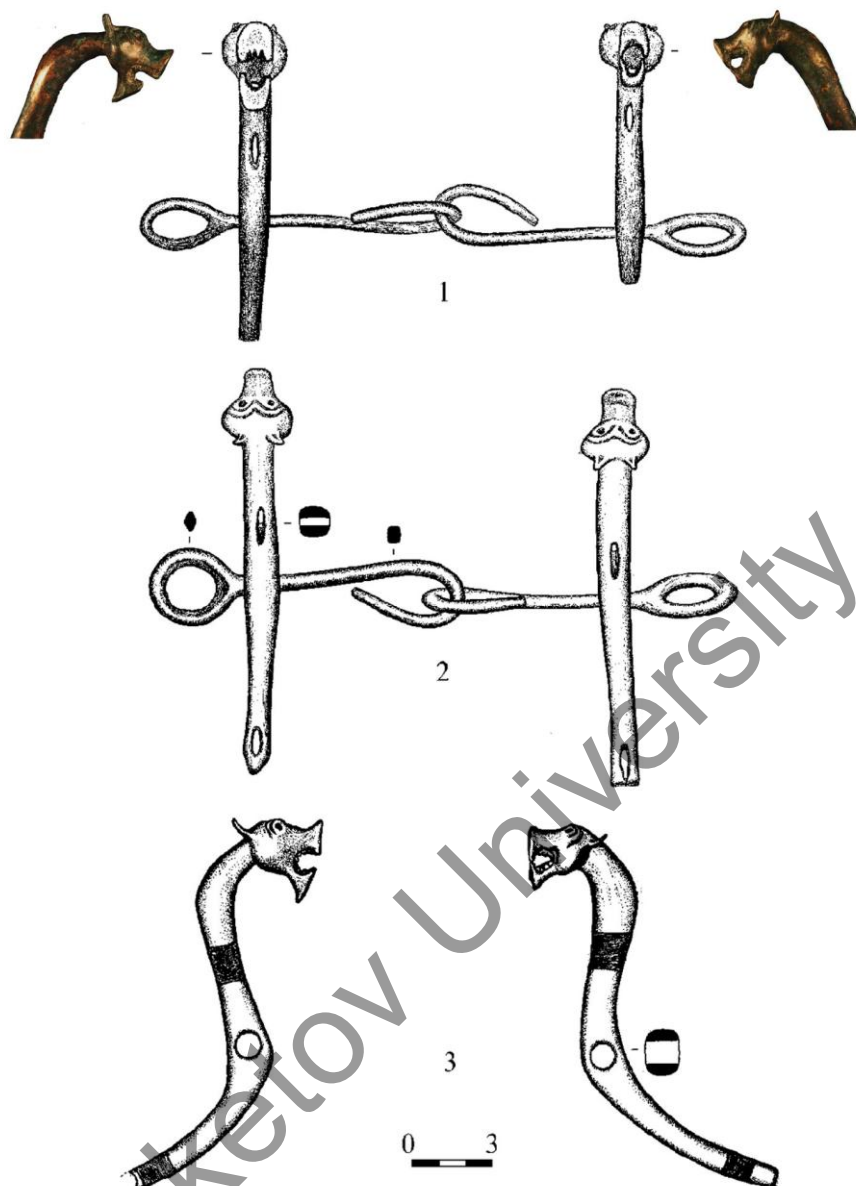


Figure 5. Bronze bits. Adaidon cemetery, grave No. 37 [13]

The borrowing of bridles from the northern and southern neighbours is explained by the specific historical period when the population of the Koban culture was involved in the military campaigns of the nomads (Cimmerians) to the Near East. The campaigns and trade operations with the inhabitants of the southern Caucasus created dynamic links between distant regions and the bearers of different cultures. It was at this time that such masterpieces as the Koban pin with a horseman were created. Its owner was undoubtedly a member of the military horsemen's elite and was distinguished by his social status among other representatives of the local community.

Conclusions

The long-standing contacts between the peoples of the world have always been a powerful factor in the development of culture. The influence of this factor manifests itself in different ways, depending on the conditions under which it takes place and the aspects of culture it affects. When we look at ancient artifacts from this perspective, it becomes clear that the impact of such contacts was not so much in the appearance within a particular culture of alien, imported objects, but in the creation of innovations that were the material outcome of complex processes and relationships, a local

response to particular pressures, in a specific cultural and social context. The special meaning attached to the thing in the traditional cultures is obviously the reason for this. The Koban bronze pin decorated with a sculptured figure of a horseman, provides evidence of such intercultural material and social entanglements in the late 8th century BC through the skilful and nuanced blending of diverse features in a single object.

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Қобан қорымының ежелгі сақтарға дейінгі кезеңінің бірегей олжасы туралы

Қобан мәдениеті — Кавказ аймағының ең көрнекті мәдени құбылыстарының бірі. Оның материалдары көптеген еуропалық мұражайларда сақталған және кең халықаралық ғылыми қоғамдастықтың ғылыми қызығушылығының тақырыбы болып саналады. Венадағы табиғи тарих мұражайында сақталған Қобан коллекциялары Еуропадағы Кавказ көне жәдігерлерінің ең маңызды және құнды мұражай топтамаларының бірі. ХІХ ғасырда мұражайдың антропологиялық және этнографиялық бөлімінің директоры Франц Хегер сатып алған бұл коллекцияда эпонимдік Қобан қорымының көптеген жоғары ақпараттық артефактілері бар 30-дан астам өкілді жерлеу кешендері, сондай-ақ кейбір басқа Қобан мәдени ескерткіштері бар. Бұл деректер зерттеушілерге әлі белгісіз. Вена коллекциялары бірегей, өйткені олар жерлеуде құнды жерлеу заттары мен жерлеу киімінің элементтері болған қоғамның элитасына тиесілі болды. Венадан алынған бұл жинақ біздің дәуірімізге дейінгі Х-V ғасырлар аралығындағы Орталық Кавказдың ежелгі мәдениеті мен тарихына қатысты мәселелерді зерттеудің негізгі нысанына айналады. Мақалада Қобан қорымынан табылған қызықты олжалардың бірі, атап айтқанда № 1 (1884) жерлеуден табылған салт аттының құйма мүсінімен безендірілген қола түйреуішті талдауға арналған.

Кілт сөздер: Вена табиғат тарихы мұражайы, Кавказ жинағы, кобандық мәдениет, Қобан қорымдары, жерлеу, б.э.д. VIII ғ., металл өңдеу, қола түйреуіш, салт атты, садақ.

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Об одной уникальной находке позднейшего предскифского периода из Кобанского некрополя

Кобанская культура — один из наиболее ярких культурных феноменов Кавказского региона. Ее материалы хранятся во многих европейских музеях и являются предметом научного интереса широкого международного научного сообщества. Кобанская коллекция, находящаяся в Венском музее естественной истории, является одной из самых значительных и ценных музейных собраний кавказских древностей в Европе. Эта коллекция, приобретенная в ХІХ веке директором Антропологического и этнографического отдела музея Францем Хегером, включает более 30 представительных погребальных комплексов со многочисленными высокоинформативными артефактами эпонимного Кобанского некрополя, а также некоторых других памятников кобанской культуры. Эти данные еще не известны исследователям. Собрания из Вены уникальны, поскольку принадлежат представителям элиты общества, чьи захоронения включали ценные предметы погребения и элементы погребального костюма. Это делает коллекцию из Вены ключевым объектом для изучения вопросов, связанных с древней культурой и историей Центрального Кавказа Х–V веков до н. э. Настоящая статья посвящена анализу одной из интересных находок из Кобанского могильника, а именно, бронзовой булавки, украшенной литой фигуркой всадника, обнаруженной в Погребении № 1 (1884 г.).

Ключевые слова: Венский музей естественной истории, Кавказская коллекция, кобанская культура, Кобанский могильник, погребения, VIII в. до н.э., металлообработка, бронзовая булавка, всадник, лук.

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