

IMAGE OF A HORSEMAN ON A BRONZE PIN FROM THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM VIENNA

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the consideration of a bronze pin decorated with the cast figure of a horseman. It comes from burial № 1 (1884) of the famous Koban cemetery and is kept in the Natural History Museum in Vienna.

Keywords: Koban culture, Natural History Museum Vienna, bronze pin, horseman, bow.

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This article is dedicated to the consideration of one of the masterpieces of the metalwork of the Koban culture, namely a pin decorated with a cast figure of a horseman (fig. 1, 1). It is kept in the Natural History Museum Vienna and comes from the famous Koban burial ground, located in the North Ossetia⁴.

This object has been studied by many researchers who have given different interpretations to its images. The dating of the pin also varies in these publications from the end of the 2nd millennium BC to the 5th – 4th centuries BC [Кузьмина 1973; Ковалевская 1977; Вольная 2011; Брилева 2012; Бурков 2019].

The frequent errors in the description of this object are largely due to the fact that researchers were unfamiliar with the original artefact and used a photograph published by P. S. Uvarova in 1900 to analyse the pin⁵ [Уварова 1900, таб. XL, 2]. However, even in this first publication there was an inaccuracy, which was pointed out by F. Hancar in 1932, namely that P. S. Uvarova mistook a bow hanging from the rider's waist for a part of the saddle [Hancar 1932: 149].

It is also extremely important that the pin in question is not an accidental find, but is associated with an informative archaeological complex – the burial of a warrior horseman (grave № 1). Its materials came to the Natural History Museum Vienna in 1884. Artefacts from this assemblage are

⁴Practically all authors who have written about the pin in question, beginning with P. S. Uvarova [Уварова 1900: 53] and ending with current researchers [Брилева 2012; Бурков 2019], have erroneously indicated the anonymous "Vienna Museum" as its place of storage, which is not correct.

⁵False are 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. [Кривиций 2011: 108 Брилева 2012: 178; Бурков 2019: 70].

currently being prepared for publication [Makhortykh et al. 2025], so only the pin will be discussed in this paper.

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. 2). Its concave sides are decorated with parallel incised 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.

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, 1-3). 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: 1-3). 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 nose⁶. 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.

The pin under consideration belongs to a number of unique works of arts and crafts of the Koban culture. It is an example of the individual artistic creativity of a local craftsman and has no analogues in any of the cultures

⁶The face of a rider is depicted in a similar manner on a bronze statuette from burial № 15 of the Brili cemetery in Georgia, which dates to the Early Scythian period (fig. 4, 5) [Брилева 2012: 142, кат. 375].

of the vast Caucasus region⁴. 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 № 37 of the Adaidon burial ground and grave № 76 of the Tli cemetery⁵ (fig. 3, 1-3) [Техов 1980: таб. 56; Сокровища Алании 2011: рис. 42; 43; Чшиев 2022]. It should be emphasised 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.

A bronze dagger with a pommel decorated with cast schematic figures of two riders was found in burial № 37 of the Adaidon burial ground (fig. 3, 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 № 37 of the Adaidon burial ground is determined within the framework of the middle to second half of the 8th century BC⁶ [Чшиев 2022: 159].

The image of a rider is also present on a bronze belt from burial № 76 of the Tli burial ground (fig. 3, 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

⁷It should be noted that original bronze pins of other types are also known in the Koban necropolis, which emphasises the special, exclusive place of this monument in the structure of the Koban historical and cultural community. These pins have a rounded, sometimes grooved, upper part ending in a flat platform on which are placed compositions of various animals (fig. 1, 2, 3) [Chantre 1886].

⁸It should be noted 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.

⁹A 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. 3, 4) [Брилева 2012: 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 [Кузьмина 1973: 189].



Fig. 1. Bronze pins from the Koban necropolis



Fig. 2. Image of a horseman on a bronze pin from grave № 1 (1884) of the Koban necropolis

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 № 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) [Воронов 1980: 205; Ильинская 1982; Дударев 1991; Техов 2006: 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. 2, 3; 3, 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 [Черненко 1981: 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 [Хазанов 1971: 29, 30; Ермолов 1987: 150, 151; Горелик 1993: 75]. Similar wooden bows of asymmetrical shape were also found in pre-Scythian sites in the south of Eastern Europe – kurgan № 2, grave № 5 near Zimogorya in eastern Ukraine, tomb № 261 of the cemetery Klin-Yar III in Stavropol region [Дубовская 1985: рис. 3; Белинский, Дударев 2015: рис. 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. 3: 7-10) [Castelluccia 2017: 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 № 76 of the Tli cemetery (fig. 3, 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,



Fig. 3. Figurines, as well as depictions of horsemen and composite bows: 1, 2 – Adaidon cemetery, grave № 37; 3 – Tli cemetery, grave № 76; 4 – Sulori; 5 – Brili cemetery, grave № 15; 6 – Kazbek treasure; 7 – Sevan; 8 – Mouçi-yéri; 9 – Astchi blur; 10 – Akhtala (not to scale)

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 [Махортых 2006]. 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 burial ground, 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 №№ 210, 244) [Техов 1980: таб. 91, 3; 105, 4; Махортых, Котова 2024]. 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 № 1 (1884) of the Koban cemetery, provides convincing evidence of contacts between the Kobans 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. (fig. 4, 1, 2, 4, 6).

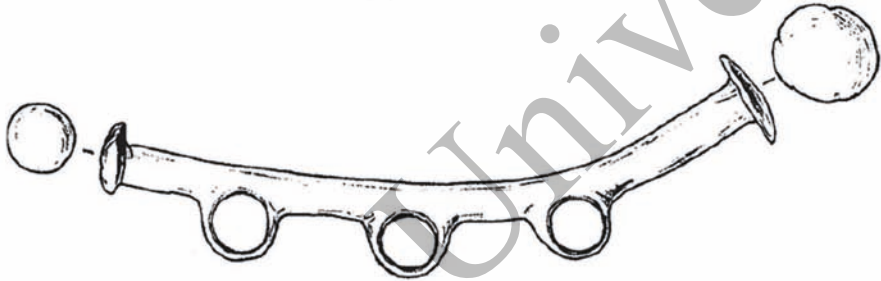
These objects find analogies in such burial grounds as Belyaevskiy, Klin-Yar III (burials №№ 184, 186), Elkhotovo (burial № 85), etc. (fig. 4, 3, 5, 7, 8) [Эрлих 2007: рис. 89, 3, 4; Белинский, Дударев 2015: рис. 25, 9; 28, 3; Чшиев 2016: рис. 1, 7-9]. The above-mentioned bridle accessories belong to the rather reliable chronological indicators that allow us to date



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

Fig. 4. Bronze bridle accessories: 1, 2, 4, 6 – Koban necropolis, grave № 1 (1884); 3 – Belyaevskiy cemetery; 5 – Klin-Yar III cemetery, burial № 184; 7, 8 – Elkhotovo cemetery, burial № 85 (not to scale)

the burial № 1 with a pin from the Koban necropolis within the framework of the second half – the end of the 8th century BC, and probably early 7th century BC⁴.

The above-mentioned interactions of the Koban tribes with the early nomads of the 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 West Asia. This is strongly supported by the original horse equipment found with the image of riders in burial № 37 of the Adaidon cemetery. 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 [Сокровища Алании 2011: рис. 83].

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 early 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.

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⁴ V. B. 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 9 (fig. 3, 6) [Ковалевская 1977: 65; Брилева 2012: 310, кат. 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 [Бурков 2019: 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.

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ВЕНАДАҒЫ ТАБИҒИ ТАРИХ МҰРАЖАЙЫНЫҢ ҚОЛА ТҮЙРЕУШІНДЕГІ ШАБАНДОЗДЫҢ БЕЙНЕСІ

Аннотация. Мақала шабандоздың құйылған фигурасымен безендірілген қола түйреуішті қарастыруға арналған. Ол әйгілі Кубань қорымының № 1 (1884) жерлеуінен шыққан және Венадағы табиғи тарих мұражайында сақталған.

Түйін сөздер: Кобан мәдениеті, Вена табиғи тарих мұражайы, қола түйреуіш, шабандоз, садақ.

ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕ ВСАДНИКА НА БРОНЗОВОЙ БУЛАВКЕ ИЗ МУЗЕЯ ЕСТЕСТВЕННОЙ ИСТОРИИ В ВЕНЕ

Аннотация. Статья посвящена рассмотрению бронзовой булавки, украшенной литой фигуркой всадника. Она происходит из погребения № 1 (1884) знаменитого Кобанского могильника и хранится в Музее естественной истории в Вене.

Ключевые слова: Кобанская культура, Венский музей естественной истории, бронзовая булавка, всадник, лук.