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PERSIA BEYOND THE IMPERIAL FRONTIERS: THE NOMADS OF THE SOUTH URAL REGION VERSUS THE NEAR EAST

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Introduction

One of the key issues in the history of Iran are its relations with its neighbours as well as distant peoples in the steppes of Central Eurasia. The Achaemenid era (550–330 BC) was a period of particularly intense and comprehensive growth in these relations. We know that the Arsacid state (248 BC – 226 AD) was created in outcome of an invasion by Iranian nomadic tribes on a region of Khorasan with a sedentary population, in north-eastern Iran. A dynasty with a nomadic background created a state in Iran which grew into a rival empire to Rome.¹ Recent archaeological discoveries show that there were close links between the nomads and the cultures of Iran and Central Asia in the times preceding the Arsacids, that is in the Achaemenid and in the early post-Achaemenid period (mid-6th – 3rd century BC).

In this article I will address selected issues concerning the nomads of the South Ural region (= SUR), and their relations with Iran and the lands of the Trans-Caspian and Aral region as well as in the Oxos/Amudarya Basin (including Chorasmia), in the Achaemenid and early post-Achaemenid periods. The cultures of the SUR were created by the Sauromatian and Sarmatian tribes belonging to the northern branch of the Iranian speaking peoples. Iran's close political and cultural relations with the steppes stretching from Karakum and the northern marches of Hyrkania to the SUR had important repercussions for the

¹ See Olbrycht 1998; 1998a; 2015.

history of Western and Central Asia, giving rise to the powerful Arsacid state. The Arsacids were descended from the nomadic Dahae, but they also had close connections with the Massagetae, another people inhabiting the Trans-Caspian and Aral region. Historical records on these peoples are sparse, which makes the archaeological material invaluable.

A recently published study offers a huge collection of data concerning the nomadic cultures of the SUR and their relations with the Achaemenid empire. L. Yablonsky, an experienced researcher from Moscow on the nomadic cultures of the SUR and Central Asia, and M. Treister, who is a specialist on ancient iconography and metalwork and is currently affiliated at Bonn/Berlin and formerly at Moscow and Kerch, decided to compile and publish an edition of artefacts imported by the nomads from Western and Central Asia and imitations of items coming from the Achaemenid milieu. Thanks to their work a vast monograph entitled *Einflüsse der achämenidischen Kultur im südlichen Uralvorland (5.- 3. Jh. v.Chr.)* (Vienna, 2013) (this work is hereafter cited as *EAKSU I-II*) has been published within the framework of a project financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Russian State Foundation for Humanities (RGNF).² This study consists of two volumes. Volume 1 comprises 25 articles and a dozen appendices. Over half of the volume (*EAKSU I*, 329–686) is composed of colour and black-and-white plates, drawings and 27 maps. Volume 2 contains the main catalogue of the artefacts, descriptions of graves containing Achaemenid artefacts, and a bibliography. There is a separate account of the stone pearls and ceramics. In this volume there are 37 colour plates, 35 black-and-white photos, and 124 plates with drawings.

The sites described in the publication are located in the foreground of the South Ural (Russia), and in Western Kazakhstan. The artefacts recorded in the catalogue come from this region, too. The authors use the label Southern Ural piedmont for their region of study, but in the sub-chapter entitled ‘Forschungsziele’ (*EAKSU I*, 12–13) they do not define its exact extent. In the chapter entitled ‘Einleitung’ they write of the work done by Soviet, Russian, and Kazakh archaeologists.³

In their work on the archaeological material the editors and contributors to the publication have undertaken to collect and extract previously unknown information. Scores of nomadic kurgans, such as the great kurgans at Filippovka and Prokhorovka, have been discovered and excavated. The artefacts made in

² M. Treister, L. Yablonsky (eds.), *Einflüsse der achämenidischen Kultur im südlichen Uralvorland (5. – 3. Jh. v.Chr.)*, Band 1–2, Wien: Phoibos-Verlag, 2013. ISBN 978–3–85161–096–3. Bd 1., 707 pp.; Bd 2., 501 pp.; Series *Ancient Toreutics and Jewellery in Eastern Europe*, edited by V. Mordvintseva and M. Treister. The book was published in two versions: in German and in Russian. This article deals with the German edition.

³ *EAKSU I*, 12, 19.

a foreign style which have been discovered in the kurgans of the SUR include objects associated with trade, gifts, and trophies. Some of these items were made in the royal workshops of Iran, others come from provincial workshops in the satrapies; and still others are locally made imitations. Over 80 artefacts from the Achaemenid milieu, in addition to about 180 stone pearls from India or territories in Iran and neighbouring countries, have been discovered in the SUR.⁴ There have also been finds of Egyptian faience.⁵

The book edited by Treister and Yablonsky presents the Achaemenid empire as the chief centre of civilisation with which the nomads of the SUR were in close touch. The Achaemenid state fell in 330 BC, but the close relations of the SUR peoples with the Trans-Caspian – Aral region persisted. Many things changed in the times of Alexander and the Seleucids, but the peoples of the SUR, the Trans-Caspian – Aral region, and the Oxos/Amudarya Basin kept up their intense, mutual links with Iran in political, cultural, and economic affairs.

The current state of research

Research on the graves of the SUR nomads has a long tradition going back to 1911, when local peasants discovered ancient kurgans in the villages of Pokrovka and Prokhorovka near Orenburg.⁶ These burial sites were plundered, but I.A. Castanet and M.I. Rostovtzeff soon started research on them. Rostovtzeff published his results in 1918.⁷ He dated the Prokhorovka kurgans to the 3rd–2nd century BC, or possibly earlier still, to the 4th century, and attributed them to the Sarmatians. P.A. Kokovtsov published a brief epigraphic study of the Prokhorovka inscriptions.⁸ These publications mark the beginning of scholarly research on the culture of the SUR peoples in the Sauromatian and Sarmatian periods. B.N. Grakov, K.F. Smirnov, and A. Kh. Pshenichnīuk continued in the tradition of Rostovtzeff's research. In 1986–1990 Pshenichnīuk's expedition excavated 17 kurgans at Filippovka, and retrieved numerous Achaemenid artefacts from the royal kurgan (No. 1). L.T. Yablonsky excavated the Prokhorovka burial ground in 2003–2005, and kurgans at Filippovka in 2004–2009. In the same period research was being conducted in Western Kazakhstan, on burial grounds at Lebedevka-II, Kyryk-Oba-II, Volodarka, and other places.⁹

⁴ *EAKSU* I, 320.

⁵ *EAKSU* I, 13.

⁶ On the history of the archaeological research in the SUR, see Treister, Yablonsky in *EAKSU* I, 14–21.

⁷ Rostovtzeff 1918.

⁸ Kokovtsov 1918, 82–83.

⁹ Cf. Stöllner, Samašev (eds.) 2013, *passim*.

Traditionally the term ‘Sauromatian’ is used for the culture of the early SUR nomads, and ‘Sarmatian’ for its later periods, starting from the Prokhorovka phase. Herodotus, the earliest writer in antiquity to leave a record of the peoples east of the Volga, did not use the term ‘Sarmatians,’ and instead had ‘Sauromatians.’¹⁰

Imports, gifts, imitations

Products from the centres of craftsmanship in Iran and lands under Achaemenid suzerainty, particularly Chorasmia, play an important role in the reconstruction of the history and culture of the SUR. There were several categories of products imported to the SUR: artefacts made in workshops belonging to the Achaemenid Court, artefacts from the satrapies, and ‘Persian-Barbarian’ products. This last category is very general and comprises several different groups of items.¹¹ Another classification lists three categories: imitations, adaptations, and derivations.¹² It is difficult to ascribe individual artefacts to a particular category, and in some cases impossible, due to the difficulty in distinguishing between the hypothetical workshops and their location. Some relatively distant workshops concentrated on export to the steppes. For instance, we know that the local workshops of Achaemenid Anatolia produced metal vessels for the steppe inhabitants of the North Caucasus and North Pontic region. There must have been a similar situation with the production of certain other items made specially for SUR nomads.

Even individual artefacts may serve as the basis for far-reaching conclusions on history. An example is provided by a sword with an ornamental scabbard from a kurgan at Chertomlyk (Ukraine), which M. Treister and L. Yablonsky describe at length.¹³ The scabbard shows a battle scene between the Greeks and warriors identified as the Trojans or Persians. Treister and Yablonsky think one of the warriors (wearing a diadem) may be Alexander the Great. According to them the sword and apparently the scabbard (with the alleged depiction of Alexander) may have been a gift presented by Alexander himself to the rulers of Scythia around 329–328 BC.¹⁴ At first glance it looks like an intriguing interpretation. It is however hard to identify any of the figures in the scene as a ruler, unless it is the naked warrior with a Hoplite shield.¹⁵ Battle scenes are part of the traditional iconography of Greeks fighting Amazons, Trojans or Persians, but

¹⁰ Yablonsky, Balakhvantsev in *EAKSU I*, 22, n. 4. See Olbrycht 2000.

¹¹ A detailed classification of Achaemenid and Achaemenid-inspired toreutic items has been elaborated by E. Rehm in *EAKSU I*, 35–52.

¹² Miller 1997, 136–150.

¹³ *EAKSU I*, 319.

¹⁴ Treister, Yablonsky in *EAKSU I*, 319–320. See Alekseev 2006, 160–167; 2007, 254.

¹⁵ Alekseev 2007, pl. 9.

there are no clear references to Alexander here. It would have been strange for Alexander to have invoked the conflict between Macedonia and Persia in 329–328, at a time when he was implementing his pro-Iranian policy.¹⁶ A dating to ca. 329–328 for this artefact is speculative, and there are no grounds for it. It is more likely that the scabbard was one of a series of mid-4th century BC products from the North Pontic region.

One of the artefacts discovered in the SUR is particularly noteworthy. It is a silver cup with a gold-leaf surface (Cat. No. A11.2.1.11), that was found in kurgan B/2003, burial No. 3 at Prokhorovka, the grave of a young woman.¹⁷ The cup was made in the Persian–Macedonian style, and could have been brought to Central Asia by Alexander or Seleucus I (*EAKSU* I, 18). This artefact belongs to the Macedonian type of Achaemenid vessels.¹⁸ Currently over 30 such cups are known, mainly from Macedonia (Vergina, Derveni etc.) and the North Pontic region, e.g. from Karagodeuashkh (the Taman Peninsula, Russia). Treister claims that the Prokhorovka cup, which weighs 329 g, is heavier than most vessels of this type, and that its weight corresponds to the weight of 100 sigloi minted in compliance with the alleged Persian–Seleucid system of weights and measures.¹⁹ According to Treister, its technical features and iconography suggest that it was made in the late 4th, or the first half of the 3rd century BC in Asia Minor or Syria. In my opinion we cannot rule out Iran as its provenance.

The peoples of the SUR enjoyed a wide spectrum of relations with the Achaemenids. Apart from trade, they must also have established diplomatic relations, if an alabastron bearing an inscription with the name a king of Persia (Artaxerxes I) has been found in the region.²⁰

The phialae from kurgan 1 at Prokhorovka

In 1911 two phialae with Aramaic inscriptions were discovered in kurgan No. 1 at Prokhorovka. One is in Orenburg Museum in Russia, and the other at Almaty, Kazakhstan. A. Balakhvantsev has dedicated a special epigraphic study to them.²¹ The inscriptions are short, and one of them, Prokhorovka 1, comprises the name of the vessel's owner, Ātarmihr. It is hard to date such laconic inscriptions, which makes it all the more imperative to date the burial and the time when

¹⁶ Olbrycht 2004.

¹⁷ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 103–105, pl. I.8–10.

¹⁸ Pfrommer 1987, 56–61, 234–236.

¹⁹ Cf. Guzzo 2003, 78–79.

²⁰ Balakhvantsev, in *EAKSU* I, 250–252.

²¹ *EAKSU* I, 250–258.

the vessels were made. A new discussion on the Prokhorovka phialae started in the late 1990s thanks to the Russian archaeologist V. Zuev, who stated that Prokhorovka kurgan No. 1 was a 1st century BC monument. He examined the phialae and determined that they were made in the 4th – 3rd century BC, but not deposited in the grave until the 1st century BC at the earliest.²² The distinguished scholar of Iranian culture and languages, V.A. Livshits, concluded that the inscriptions were made between the turn of the 2nd and 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, and that they are in Parthian.²³ His fairly late dating seems to have been suggested by Zuev's archaeological arguments. L. Yablonsky carried out a new analysis of the artefacts from Prokhorovka kurgan No. 1, arriving at a conclusion that it was constructed between the late 4th century BC and the 3rd century BC. Therefore the inscriptions must have been made by the 3rd century at the latest.

V.I. Mordvintseva has drawn attention to the apertures in the phialae, and has stated that they must have been used as phalerae, metal disks which were part of a horse harness.²⁴ If her conjecture is right, it would mean a considerable lapse of time between the time the phialae were made and the time of their interment.

Balakhvantsev and Yablonsky (*EAKSU* I, 18, n. 54), and Treister concluded that one of the phialae was made in the first half of the 5th century BC, and the second in the second half of the 4th century BC, and that they were interred in the 3rd century BC. According to Balakhvantsev (*EAKSU* I, 252–258), the Almaty phiale was probably made in Iran, perhaps in Media, in the second half of the 4th or in the 3rd century BC. The inscription on it comes from that time. It seems that Balakhvantsev was trying to synchronise it with the Naqsh-e Rostam Aramaic inscription, which was made ca. 300 BC.²⁵ The Orenburg phiale is harder to date. Balakhvantsev's conclusion is that it is not later than the mid–3rd century BC. His epigraphic arguments dating these inscriptions to the late 4th or 3rd century BC seem fairly convincing. They are bolstered by the archaeological argument, i.e. the dating of kurgan No. 1 to the 3rd century BC at the latest, as estimated by Yablonsky in a comprehensive analysis.²⁶ The discovery of similar vessels at Isakovka near Omsk is a relevant factor for the dating (and determination of the function) of the Prokhorovka phialae.

An important factor for the assessment of the relations of the Central Asian nomads with the territories of Chorasmia and Iran are the finds from Isakovka

²² Livshits, Zuev 2004, 11.

²³ Livshits 2001 and 2004.

²⁴ Mordvintseva 1996, 155–160.

²⁵ On the Naqsh-e Rostam inscription, see Olbrycht 2013a, 176.

²⁶ Yablonskiy 2012, 72–75 dates the kurgan between at the end of the 4th century and the end of the 3rd century BC. This implies that the inscriptions on the phialae are not later than from the 3rd century BC.

near Omsk (Western Siberia). In 1989 the Omsk State University archaeological expedition led by L.I. Pogodin carried out excavations at the Isakovka Burial-ground No. 1. In Burial No. 6 (Burial-mound 3) L.I. Pogodin found three silver bowls with inscriptions. Burial 6 was a royal tomb and contained, i.a., gold belt plaques with scenes of camels fighting a snake, iron scale armour, an iron spear, the remains of a bow and quiver, and a number of other items. The Omsk archaeologist Matīushchenko dated the burial at the 3rd – 1st century BC.²⁷ Two of the excavated bowls bore Choresmian inscriptions, and the third a Parthian inscription. The items of the burial remain unpublished but in my opinion the existing descriptions²⁸ allow a dating of the burial to the late 2nd and 1st centuries BC.

These Choresmian inscriptions are the earliest of all the known texts written in Choresmian. They date from the second half of the 3rd or 2nd century BC. The shape of the letters in these inscriptions is still very similar to the Aramaic letters of the Achaemenid period (imperial Aramaic), and there are many Aramaic ideograms.²⁹

The first inscription reads:

št ZNH wtykny MN βrz 'wny thwmkn (or tswmkn) WKN 'HRY MR'Y MLK' 'mwrzm BR MLK' wrdn mzd'hy 'BDw QPD (or QPR) GYN III prwrtyn

“This festive bowl is from Barzawan, son of Takhumak (or Tasumak). And now then: His Majesty, King Amuržam, son of the King Wardān, (this bowl) has been made for his reward . . . on the third (of the month of) Frawartīn.”

The second inscription has been deciphered only partially and contains the following phrase

wtsk ZNH 'QT (or RQT, DQT) KZT 'mwβxš ZZ B 1 x 100(+) 20 SRM (S'M, SDM) LMR'Y wrδk mzd'hy WR (or WD) LYD rwmn (δwmn?) tyry PZQQ(?)TYN

“This bowl . . . of weight (?) 120 staters . . . to the sovereign Wardak – a reward for him . . . Through Ruman(?) Tīr. . . .”

Livshits seems to be suggesting that the inscriptions are from the late 3rd to the 2nd century BC.³⁰ In the Isakovka 1 inscription we have a king Wardan (Choresmian Wardān, Parthian Wardān), son of king Amuržam, while in the Isakovka 2 inscription we have the name of a ruler Wardak (wrδk / Wardak). Wardak is a suffixal variant of Wardān from the Isakovka inscription 1.³¹ The Wardān/Wardan in these Choresmian inscriptions was probably the ruler of Chorasmiā.

²⁷ Matīushchenko, Tamaurova 1997, 61.

²⁸ Koryakova, Epimakhov 2007, 303–308.

²⁹ Livshits 2003.

³⁰ Livshits 2003.

³¹ Livshits 2003, 164.

The name Wardan (Wardān) occurs in the Arsacid dynasty. It was the name of an Arsacid king who ruled in 39–46 AD. It was fairly familiar in Armenia; in the 5th century AD it was the name of Prince Wardan (Wardān) Mamikonian. It also occurs in the onomastics of Sogd.³² King Wardan of Parthia owed his name to Arsacid family connections with the royal house of Chorasmia. King Artabanos I of Parthia (8/9–39 AD), Wardan's father, pursued an active policy on Chorasmia, and we cannot rule out that he married a Chorasmian princess and had a son, Wardan, by her.³³

There is an analogy to the Choresmian inscriptions from Isakovka in the inscription from Burly-kala in the Sultanuizdag Mountains. It was cut on a camel's jaw and entails a list of personal names.³⁴ The inscription dates to the second half of the 3rd century BC or 2nd century BC, and demonstrates that Choresmians used Younger Avestan names like Asnīwarnik and Haθyamak. This in turn shows that Zoroastrianism was well-established in Chorasmia, and reached neighbouring peoples, such as the Dahae, who had been living on the peripheries of Chorasmia for hundreds of years. Thus Zoroastrian influences from Chorasmia on burial customs in the Uzboi area come as no surprise. We cannot rule out that the Choresmians considered themselves kinsfolk of the Dahae, sharing common roots. V.A. Livshits actually claims that the Choresmians traced their origins back to the Dahae.³⁵ The Bury-kala list of names includes *Δahakīnak* (*δh'kynk*), 'Dahian sword.'³⁶

The Parthian inscription on the third bowl (Isakovka 3) gives only the weight: "5 karshes, 2 staters, 1 drachm." The letters were worked in dots (pointillé technique) and the inscription is closely analogous to the inscriptions on a bowl from the village of Prokhorovka (Prokhorovka inscription no. 2) published by M.I. Ros-tovtzeff and P.K. Kokovtsov, and on the gold bowl in the Hermitage Museum. The bowl was published by K. Trever and dated to the late 2nd century BC.³⁷

The Prokhorovka and Isakovka finds show that the luxury vessels discovered in the kurgans were prestigious gifts sent to the nomads in the course of the 3rd and 2nd century BC by the rulers of Chorasmia and from Iran, including perhaps also from Parthia. The relations of both these countries with the nomads of the SUR and the Omsk area must have been very strong.

³² For Wardan / Wardān as an Iranian name, see Livshits 2010, no. 657. Wardān in Armenia: Justi 1895, 351–353.

³³ Olbrycht 2013, 79–80.

³⁴ Livshits 2003, 153–154.

³⁵ Livshits 2003, 169.

³⁶ Livshits, Mambetullaev 1986; Livshits 2010, no. 179. :

³⁷ Trever 1940, 67–68. Livshits 2003, 167 believes the Prokhorovka 2 inscription is later than the Isakovka 3 inscription.

Trade Routes

There were trade routes connecting the SUR with neighbouring political and economic centres, including Iran.³⁸ A reconstruction of their course and catchment area will help us identify the vectors of political dependence and the economic relations the peoples of the region had in the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid period. SUR nomads could well have been exporters of gold. Herodotus (4.13 and 4.27) writes of gold in this region. Archaeologists have discovered SUR sites where gold was extracted.³⁹ Stone weights perhaps used for weighing gold have been discovered in kurgan 29/2008 at Filippovka.⁴⁰

The assortment of goods the nomads exported should be augmented with fur and hide obtained from the animals in the forest zone, which the authors of the *EAKSU* have omitted. We know that fur was a sought-after and profitable commodity in Iran under the Arsacids, and subsequently in Sasanian times.⁴¹ Moreover, the SUR nomads supplied excellent mercenary soldiers, and the Achaemenids seem to have availed themselves readily of this resource. M. Treister is right to observe that there was a substantial presence of mercenary Sakas serving in the Achaemenid empire.⁴²

The trading routes can be established on the basis of ceramic finds. The conclusions S. Bolelov draws from his research on this issue are invaluable, as he is an eminent connoisseur of ceramics, especially from Chorasmia and Bactria. Pottery came to the SUR from Chorasmia, the Lower Syrdarya Basin (the Chirik-rabat Culture), and perhaps also from Parthian Iran and Caucasia. Over half of the utensils discovered in the kurgans were used for transportation; the packaging was usually ceramic.⁴³

The key area in the Trans-Caspian – Aral region for the supervision of trade routes was the Ustyurt Plateau, which was a transit area used by nomads crossing from their winter habitats to their summer camps. In the Ustyurt there was a kurgan culture from the late 5th to the 2nd century BC. Their graves contain early Sarmatian and Chorasmian pottery, showing that the region was in touch with neighbouring areas.⁴⁴ A passage from Chorasmia to the SUR and the Lower Volga region led across the Ustyurt, and it continued in use from Antiquity right until the 19th century. In the Islamic period the shahs of Chorasmia built caravan-

³⁸ Bolelov in *EAKSU* I, 238–249.

³⁹ *EAKSU* I, 314.

⁴⁰ *EAKSU* I, 322f.

⁴¹ See Olbrycht 2001.

⁴² Treister in *EAKSU* I, 321.

⁴³ Bolelov, in *EAKSU* I, 247.

⁴⁴ Īagodin 1978; Īagodin 1990, 79–80.

serais and wells there.⁴⁵ A frequently traversed trading route led along the eastern slopes of the Ustyurt to the Emba and Ilek Rivers. A silver vessel with a Choresmian tamga has been discovered in the Trans-Ural region, evidence of contacts with places as far away as Siberia.⁴⁶ Large amounts of Choresmian pottery have been found in the southern Trans-Ural region.⁴⁷

There was a route from the Lower Syrdarya region along the shore of the Aral Sea to the SUR. Another route led from the Lower Syrdarya basin to Chorasmlia over the well-watered lands east of the Aral. S. Bolelov suggests that the trading routes in the Oxos basin and the Aral area could not have been used intensely until Chorasmlia became independent of the Achaemenids, which happened in the late 5th century BC.⁴⁸ But Achaemenid rule does not seem to have been an obstacle to Choresmian trade with the steppe peoples.

The key aspect to be taken into account for an assessment of the SUR's economic and cultural relations is the waterway via the Caspian Sea out across the Caucasus and Caucasian Albania to the River Uzboy and in to Parthia and Chorasmlia. We need to know how that route operated, as many researchers deny its very existence. The new archaeological discoveries seem to have dispelled the misgivings over the use of the Uzboy in Antiquity.⁴⁹ The name 'Uzboy' does not appear in Yablonsky and Treister's publication, which is an unfortunate shortcoming. It has to be stressed that the water provided by the Uzboy encouraged nomads to set up their camps, and even to build permanent settlements and places of worship (sanctuaries) on the territories between the Ustyurt and Khorasan.

One of the artefacts discovered at Dev Kesken 4 on the Ustyurt is a double-handled clay flask.⁵⁰ Utensils of this type were common in Media Atropatene.⁵¹ The Dev Kesken 4 flask is evidence of connections between the Ustyurt and Chorasmlia via the sea route and the Uzboy. Another point worthy of notice are the relations of the SUR with Dahistan. A jug discovered at Iakovlevka in the SUR, representing a type characteristic for Dahistan, indicates the existence of trade relations.⁵²

A high-necked jug with handles decorated with spherical appliqué has been discovered in a grave at the Zaplavnoe burial-ground in the Lower Volga region.⁵³ Vessels of this type are not known for Chorasmlia, but they do occur in

⁴⁵ Bolelov in *EAKSU I*, 249

⁴⁶ Sal'nikov 1952, 193–6.

⁴⁷ Mazhitov, Pshenichnik 1977, 55.

⁴⁸ Bolelov, in *EAKSU*, 249.

⁴⁹ Olbrycht 1998a; 2010a.

⁵⁰ Iagodin 1990, 54–55.

⁵¹ Koshelenko 1985, 176, pl. LXII; Bolelov in *EAKSU I*, 248.

⁵² Bolelov in *EAKSU I*, 247–249, Treister in *EAKSU I*, 313). See Ill. II.115.3; Plate II.35.2. Cat. No. 41. The grave is dated to the late 5th – first half of the 4th century BC (Sirotin in *EAKSU II*, 161).

⁵³ Moshkova 1963, 30, Pl. 12.8.

Parthia and Khorasan.⁵⁴ Many have been found in Caucasia, including Albania, and in Atropatene, in 4th–3rd – century BC jar-burials.⁵⁵ Vessels of this kind appear to have arrived in the Volga region along the western shore of the Caspian Sea, but they also accompanied other goods reaching the Trans-Caspian – Aral region. Chorasmia evidently had strong links with the SUR.⁵⁶ Pottery from Chorasmia has been found in several graves in the SUR, at Berdyanka-V, Starye Kiishki, and Bishungarovo.⁵⁷

The nomads of the South Ural region

The burial sites in the SUR dating from the Achaemenid period are ascribed to 3 chronological phases. The phases are as follows:⁵⁸

- The Sauromatian phase (pre-Filippovka phase) (Pyatimary; some of the Pokrovka kurgans);
- The Filippovka phase (the Filippovka-I kurgans);
- The Prokhorovka phase (or post-Filippovka phase); basically post-Achaemenid burials (the Prokhorovka and Berdyanka-V kurgans).⁵⁹

The Sauromatian phase covers the period from the late 6th to the third quarter of the 5th century BC. In this phase imports from the Achaemenid empire entail multi-coloured glass vessels, jewellery, and Egyptian faience. There are only a few large metal artefacts. One of the particularly noteworthy finds is a chalcedon seal, from a grave at Dolinnoe. It probably came from Anatolia and has been dated as not later than the beginning of the 5th century BC. Other artefacts from the Dolinnoe burial site include a rhyton and a metal necklace, probably made in Anatolia. For this phase we have Choresmian pottery in the SUR, which suggests that the Anatolian items might have reached the SUR via Chorasmia.⁶⁰

In the Filippovka phase a large quantity of metal artefacts came into the SUR. They include items denoting prestige such as weapons, products made of precious metals, ornaments, furniture, and a horse harness. A noteworthy item is an Artaxerxes I alabastron from a Novyi Kumak kurgan. Many of these objects were in use for a considerable length of time before they were interred. Pottery from Central Asia, including Chorasmia, is fairly rare for this phase.

⁵⁴ Koshelenko 1985, 367, Pl. 79.

⁵⁵ Koshelenko 1985, 118, Pl. 4. Bolelov in *EAKSU* I, 248–249.

⁵⁶ Cf. Treister in *EAKSU* I, 313; Bolelov in *EAKSU* I, 247–249; Īagodin 2010, 53–58, ill. 1–2. 9.

⁵⁷ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 307.

⁵⁸ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 301–318 gives a full discussion of the problem.

⁵⁹ Chronology: Treister in *EAKSU* I, 303–304.

⁶⁰ As Treister claims (*EAKSU* I, 307).

The Filippovka I burial ground has been dated to the period from the close of the 5th century to the third quarter of the 4th century BC.

Artefacts made in the granulation technique and cloisonné ornaments have been retrieved from the Filippovka kurgans. These items might have been made in Bactria, presumably on commission for the nomads.⁶¹

Items signifying their owner's prestige make up a special category for this phase. Most of them come from two Filippovka kurgans, No. 1/1987–1988, and No. 4/2006.⁶² Kurgan 1 Filippovka 1987/8 contained 4 cloisonné plaques with the image of a male figure on a crescent moon. In Treister's opinion this is Ahuramazda. Similar plaques have been found in the collective burial in kurgan 15/2005. The plaques were damaged; perhaps they came from war spoils and were buried in a dignitary's grave. However, it is not very likely for there to be an association of the man on a half-crescent with Ahuramazda.

An Achaemenid-style necklace and two armbands were found in grave 4 of kurgan 4/2006 at Filippovka. There were Achaemenid-style plaques on the deceased woman's robes. The man interred in the same grave did not have Achaemenid-style ornaments, but there was an Achaemenid silver amphora next to his head. Treister suggests that the interred woman might have been an Achaemenid princess who had married a Saka ruler.⁶³

Most of the items signifying prestige which the nomads of the SUR acquired through their diplomatic relations with the Persians come from Filippovka burials. The authors of the *EAKSU* are right to associate these artefacts with the 'Sakas' and their military service for the Persians. Herodotus and other sources did not make a fine distinction as to which Sakas they meant when they wrote of the nomads of Asia, but this must have included nomads from the SUR.⁶⁴ Quite a long time ago already Saveleva and Smirnov argued that a set of arrowheads from the Treasury of Persepolis belonged to a type known in the SUR in the 5th century BC.⁶⁵

We have data indicating that the SUR nomads had local workshops producing ornaments. Perhaps an appliqué ornament in the shape of a lion from a robe in grave 5 of kurgan 4/2006 at Filippovka was produced in a local workshop as an imitation of an Achaemenid model.⁶⁶ However, we cannot rule out that such appliqué items were made in Chorasmia.

⁶¹ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 312. Cf. *EAKSU* I, 169–170.

⁶² Treister in *EAKSU* I, 314.

⁶³ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 315.

⁶⁴ Treister, Yablonsky in *EAKSU* I, 321.

⁶⁵ Savel'eva, Smirnov 1972, 122. Treister and Yablonsky (*EAKSU* I, 322) corroborate their claim, associating this find with the nomads of the SUR.

⁶⁶ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 312.

The Prokhorovka phase lasted from the close of 4th century BC to the late 3rd century BC.⁶⁷ Most of the imported items of prestige come from two of the Prokhorovka graves, and they include three silver vessels, two of which were probably made in the Eastern Mediterranean or Alexandria.⁶⁸

Grave No. 3 of kurgan B/2003 at Prokhorovka contained a silver cup, an onyx alabastron, and a gold ear-ring, as well as a clay jug, presumably from the Northern Caucasus.⁶⁹ The alabastron originated either from Egypt or from an Anatolian workshop.⁷⁰

The SUR nomads used scale armour with iron and horn lamellae, spears that were over 3 m long, swords, and daggers. Treister and Yablonsky write of a cataphract type of cavalry, but I do not consider this an appropriate term for the context.⁷¹

Treister devoted a substantial amount of attention to weapons of the Achaemenid type.⁷² The head of a club from Pyatimary-I he writes of most probably came from Iran. A gold ornament for a quiver or belt was an embellishment for a ceremonial weapon. Treister makes a surprising claim that the gold ornaments in the shape of griffons and wings discovered at Filippovka originated from Thrace in the Balkans.⁷³

Tests to identify the isotopic composition of five silver items brought in-valuable results.⁷⁴ They showed that four of the artefacts were made of silver from Western Asia (Asia Minor or Iran), while the fifth object was made of Mongolian or Chinese silver. Analogous tests conducted for gold on some of the artefacts showed that they were made of ore either from local deposits or from the East Ural area.⁷⁵

The Massagetae, the Dahae, and the Choresmians

Three peoples who inhabited the Trans-Caspian – Aral region, i.e. the territories between North-Eastern Iran and the SUR, are mentioned in ancient sources: the Dahae, the Massagetae (and their sub-division known as the Apasia-

⁶⁷ See Yablonsky, Balakhvantsev in *EAKSU* I, 32–34.

⁶⁸ Treister, in *EAKSU* I, 306.

⁶⁹ *EAKSU* I, colour plate II.17.1; illustration II.49.

⁷⁰ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 307.

⁷¹ Treister and Yablonsky in *EAKSU* I, 321.

⁷² Treister in *EAKSU* I, 137–142.

⁷³ Treister in *EAKSU* I, 141.

⁷⁴ A. Chugaev, I. Chernyshev in *EAKSU* I, 271–279.

⁷⁵ A. Chugaev, I. Chernyshev in *EAKSU* I, 265.

cae), and the Choresmians. These were the peoples associated with the early history of the Arsacids. The Dahae and the Massagetae were closely connected with the SUR region. The Sarmatian tribes of the SUR were apparently closely akin to the peoples of the Trans-Caspian – Aral region. Yablonsky and Treister's publication offers a new, broader insight into the role these peoples played, opening up new prospects for research and historical and archaeological reconstruction.

The origins of the Dahae of the steppes, who were the ancestors of the Arsacids, are still not very clear. Their early history is fragmentary. We know that in the mid-3rd century BC, when Arsaces I was on the throne, the Dahae controlled the steppes of South Turkmenistan between the Caspian Sea and the Amudarya Basin. In the Achaemenid period the Dahae are mentioned in written records as neighbouring on the Persian Empire in Central Asia. According to what I have been able to establish, in the late Achaemenid period and under Alexander the Dahae inhabited the lands along the Middle and Lower Syrdarya, and on the shores of the Aral Sea, and they were the neighbours of Chorasmia along the Lower Amudarya. At this time the steppes of Southern Turkmenistan from the Caspian Sea up to the Middle Amudarya were the territory of the Massagetae, who were referred to as the Sakai Tigrakhauda. They were also the dominant people in the Uzboy Valley and on part of the Ustyurt Plateau.⁷⁶ The Dahae and Massagetae supported Darius III in his war against Alexander in 331, and later they supported Spitamenes (329–328).⁷⁷

By the turn of the 4th and 3rd century BC the Dahae had migrated from the Syrdarya Basin to the steppes of Southern Turkmenistan, pushing the Massagetae north of the Uzboy. The majority of scholars of early Parthia have not paid much attention to the migration of the steppe peoples. The next stage in the expansion of the Dahae occurred during Arsaces I's attack on Khorasan, ca. 248 BC. For the next centuries the Dahae were associated with the Arsacid state. Some of them changed their lifestyle and settled in Dahistan.

The Dahae were not the only steppe people associated with the foundation of the Arsacid kingdom. When the Arsacids were attacked in Iran by Seleucid forces, the Parthian kings Arsaces I and Arsaces II withdrew into the steppes, and mounted counterattacks with the help of the Massagetean Apasiacae. The Massagetae and their sub-division the Apasiacae played a vital role.⁷⁸ In the ancient records Chorasmia is presented as a country with particularly strong links with the Massagetae.

⁷⁶ Olbrycht 1996, 156.

⁷⁷ Olbrycht 2004.

⁷⁸ Arsaces and the Apasiacae: Strab. 11.8.8.

General conclusions

North of the Achaemenid empire there were several important political centres, Bosphoros, Kolchis, and the Pazyryk Culture in the Altai Mountains, which came under a strong cultural impact from the empire. Another geographical entity which should be added to this list is the South Ural region (= SUR).

The SUR's fairly intense relations with Achaemenid Iran were examined on the basis of a series of discoveries, made either fortuitously, or in the course of regular archaeological excavation projects carried out from the 1910s to the 1970s. Since the late 1980s new discoveries have brought a welter of artefacts which show the relations between the SUR and the Achaemenids.

In the SUR there was no continuity of settlement in the long time between the period when it was inhabited by Bronze Age peoples and the nomads who appeared in the 6th century BC. The SUR's nomadic culture in the 5th – 2nd century BC was the result of the migration of peoples from the Chelabinsk area in the Trans-Ural region (*EAKSU I*, 320). The centre of nomadic habitation was in the Ilel Valley, where all the main burial sites were located, including the royal barrows at Kyrk-Oba-II, Lebedevka (Kazakhstan), Pyatimary, Pokrovka (kurgan 2/1911) and Filippovka-I. The migration probably occurred in two phases, first the Sauromatian phase, and later the Filippovka phase (*EAKSU I*, 320).

The situation in the steppes of the SUR changed in the late 4th century BC. The royal barrows disappeared. The Prokhorovka kurgans and Pokrovka-1, 7, 8, and 10 belong to this phase. In the opinion of Treister and Yablonsky (*EAKSU I*, 321), there were no changes in the population of the SUR culture at this time, but significant social changes did take place. Some of the SUR nomads left for Central Asia and the Volga area.⁷⁹ In my opinion this migration should be seen in the light of the unrest caused by Alexander's conquests and later by the operations conducted by the Seleucids against the peoples of the steppes, over an expanse stretching as far as the Syrdarya Basin.

A hypothesis put forward by Tairov says that in the third quarter of the 5th century BC some elite groups of the nomads of East Turkestan moved into the SUR.⁸⁰ Treister and Yablonsky accept this theory (*EAKSU I*, 322) and use it to explain the influx of Achaemenid imports into the SUR. But the hypothesis is not convincing; first, exactly from where were these nomads supposed to have come? And secondly, if from East Turkestan, that region was not under Achaemenid rule. Thirdly, the imports from Iran found in SUR burials were the outcome of the direct relations of the local 'Sarmatian' peoples with the Achaemenids.

⁷⁹ See also Skripkin 1990, 192–193.

⁸⁰ Tairov 2000, 322.

On the whole, however, Treister and Yablonsky's publication is a major achievement in scholarship. It contains an enormous amount of new material which will provide food for vigorous academic discussion. An essential supplement is provided by *Unbekanntes Kasachstan*, and by Yablonsky's volume on Prokhorovka.⁸¹ The research conducted in the SUR over the past thirty years has yielded an astonishing number of artefacts defined as imports from Iran and Central Asia, or as imitations of luxury goods.

The new material from the SUR helps to arrive at a better determination of the origins of the Arsacid state. We now have a better knowledge of how strong the Achaemenid relations were with the SUR and the Caspian and Aral region. Alexander carefully observed the developments in the Caspian and Aral region, the location of Spitamenes and his allies, the most powerful of whom were the Dahae and the Massagetae. Ultimately Alexander vanquished Spitamenes by making a pact with Chorasmia and applying military pressure, but he reached a compromise agreement with the Dahae and Massagetae. Presumably emissaries from the SUR were among the embassies sent to Alexander in 329–328. The course of Alexander's military and diplomatic operations in the Caspian and Aral region, from Parthia north right up to Chorasmia, show that he was well aware of what was necessary from the strategic point of view. Anyone who wanted to secure North-Eastern Iran had to enter an agreement with the nomads and with Chorasmia, and had to control the Uzboy route. If we take this circumstances into account we will appreciate the intensity of Seleucos I's policy on the Caspian and Aral region and Transoxiana, including Demodamas' and Patrokles' campaigns. The aggressive operations pursued by Alexander and the Seleucids in the border zone with the steppes triggered the migration, including the displacement of the Dahae into South Turkmenistan. The Seleucids were not able to defend their borderland of Khorasan, and the Dahae and Arsaces took advantage of this. The discoveries from the SUR and Isakovka show that in the 3rd century BC Chorasmia and Parthia maintained intense relations with the nomads in the north, who served as a support underpinning the first Arsacids. Later the Arsacids erected the Igdy-Kala fortress to ensure that they had the control of the Uzboy Basin.

Both the Dahae and the Massagetae had intimate cultural links with the tribes of the SUR. This is true especially of the Dahae. Many aspects of their culture, particularly their burial customs, known from the Uzboy Valley and from South Turkmenistan, were similar to the sepulchral practices in the SUR. The features common to the culture of the Dahae and the Prokhorovka Culture include the striking similarity of the grave goods and the structures of their burial.⁸²

⁸¹ Stöllner, Samašev (Hgg.) 2013; Yablonsky [Iablonskiĭ] 2012.

⁸² See Mandel'shtam 1963, 33; Koshelenko (ed.) 1985, 224; Olbrycht 1998a, 18; Tairov 2005, 60.

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Abstract

This article addresses selected issues concerning the nomads of the South Ural region (= SUR), and their relations with Iran and the lands of the Trans-Caspian and Aral region as well as the Oxos/Amudarya Basin (including Chorasmia), in the Achaemenid and early post-Achaemenid periods. The cultures of the SUR were created by the Sauromatian and Sarmatian tribes belonging to the northern branch of the Iranian speaking peoples. Iran's close political and cultural relations with the steppes stretching from Karakum and the northern marches of Hyrkania to the SUR had

important repercussions for the history of Western and Central Asia, giving rise to the powerful Arsacid state. The Arsacids were descended from the nomadic Dahae, but they also had close connections with the Massagetae, another people inhabiting the Trans-Caspian and Aral region. Historical records on these peoples are sparse, which makes the archaeological material invaluable. A recently published volume by L. Yablonsky and M. Treister entitled *Einflüsse der achämenidischen Kultur im südlichen Uralvorland (5.- 3. Jh. v.Chr.)* (Vienna, 2013) contains an enormous amount of new material which will provide food for vigorous academic discussion on the nomads of the South Ural area and their mutual contacts with the Achaemenid Empire, Central Asia, and post-Achaemenid states of Western and Central Asia. The research conducted in the SUR over the past thirty years has yielded an astonishing number of artefacts defined as imports from Iran and Central Asia, or as imitations of luxury goods.