

THE METAL AGES AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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A RARE BRONZE SWORD FROM LAKE BAIKAL SHORE*

This article describes an unusual high-quality tripartite bronze sword found on the shore of Lake Baikal and apparently dating to the Scythian Age. Because the blade and the hilt are nonfunctional, the sword was not used as an actual weapon. The guard is peculiarly shaped, and decorated with stylized faces. While no exact parallels are known to us, certain features link the specimen to Scythian counterparts, and to a sword from Khotu-Talaakh, Yakutia. Special attention is paid to the semantics of the find, which possibly evidence contact with the ritual practices of the Scytho-Siberian world and those of the Siberian taiga.

Keywords: Sword, Siberia, Lake Baikal, taiga zone, Scythian Age, ritual.

A story of discovery

A three-part bronze sword of unusual shape and size was found in the late 1970s by a worker of the Baykalsk Pulp and Paper Mill (in the city of Baykalsk in the Irkutsk Region) who wished to remain anonymous. According to him, it was a chance find made in a mountain valley of the Obruchevsky fault (the Primorsky ridge) between the settlement of Chernorud and the Sarma River gorge (Fig. 1). The informant stated that one of the sword's fragments (the point) protruded from the ground, and two other parts lay under nearby stones.

Initially, the sword was brought to a high school, and then to the Department of General History in Irkutsk State University. Later, this valuable find was handed by G.I. Medvedev (a University Professor) to the Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of Siberia and the

Far East in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of SB RAS, where it is currently exhibited.

Description of the find

The described bronze sword, as has been noted above, consists of three parts (Fig. 2–6). Examination of its components allows us to assert with confidence that the sword was not broken, but was cast as three elements in a mold which was most likely of clay, and in two parts*. The area where the two halves of the mold met clearly reveals a seam (Fig. 6). In some parts (for instance, on the hilt), the seam was smoothed out during the subsequent additional working. The sword was cast by the impression of the whole bronze (or, possibly, wooden) model

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Fig. 1. A hypothetical location of discovery of the sword.

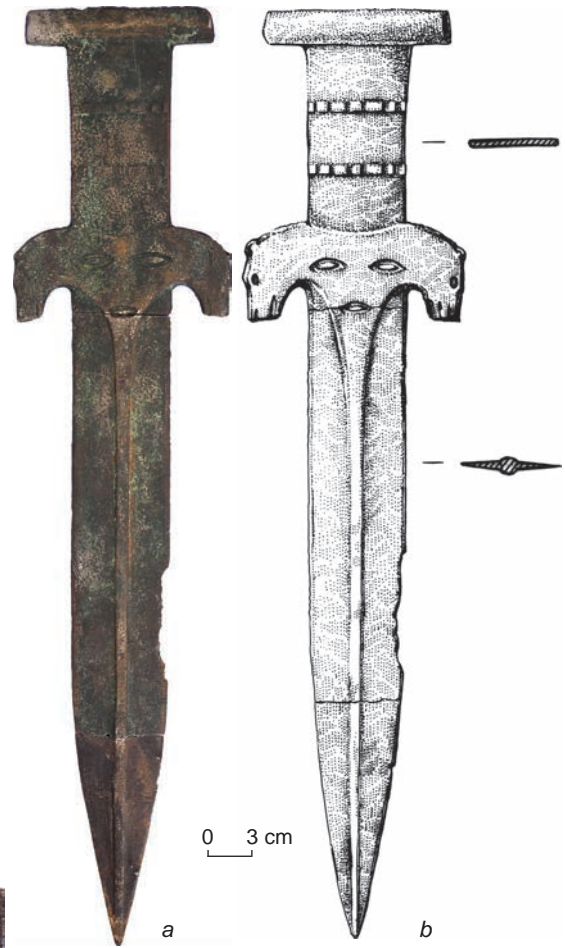


Fig. 2. A bronze sword.
a – photograph; b – drawing.



Fig. 3. The hilt and the guard.



Fig. 4. The blade.



Fig. 5. The point section.



Fig. 6. A fragment of the guard. A bear-head cast with an easily recognizable casting-seam.

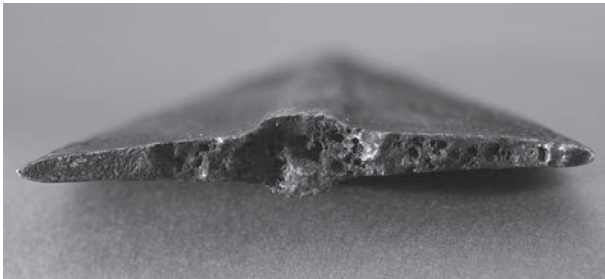


Fig. 7. The butt end of the blade with caverns resulting from gas-discharge during the casting process.



Fig. 8. Traces of grinding on the butt of the blade.

produced in raw clay; this was identified on the inner surfaces of the mold-halves. Molten metal was probably poured into the mold-cavity from the side of the hilt. The lack of traces implying mechanical action on the sword's "body" (see Fig. 3–5), and of bends which would have inevitably appeared had the artifact been hammered to break it apart, make it possible to infer that it was cast in the form of three components. In addition, the butt-ends of each part show characteristic cavities (the traces of gas discharge) resulting from the casting of a bronze object; they would not have appeared if the sword's "body"

had remained monolithic (Fig. 7) when being cast. This suggests that the primary task of the caster was that of creating a tripartite workpiece, with the probable intention of using it in ritual practice. Clear traces resulting from grinding, which can be recognized on the butt-ends of the composite parts (Fig. 8), imply that each separate element was repeatedly used. It is evident that the sword was assembled from three parts into one whole (see Fig. 2) when necessary. The sword was skillfully cast. It has only one insignificant casting defect: an incomplete cast of a blade edge (see

Fig. 2, 4). After casting, there was no need for additional working of the piece. Thus, the examination of a tripartite sword from the Cis-Baikal region, revealing a specific shape, allows us to conclude that initially it was not an actual weapon, but an object intended for ritual rites.

The sword under study is 71 cm long. Its upper third, including the hilt and guard, has a length of 23.1 cm (see Fig. 2, 3). The central part (the blade) is the longest, 32.2 cm (see Fig. 2, 4). The lower part of the blade (the point) is 15.7 cm in length (see Fig. 2, 5). The article reveals a quite unusual shape that requires a detailed analysis. First of all, attention is drawn to the hilt which is massive, large, and sub-rectangular in plan, and whose width excludes a comfortable grip by man's hand. This fact precludes the assignment of the sword to cold weapons. The hilt has a length of 14.7 cm (see Fig. 2, 3) and a sub-rectangular form in plan. Its width (7.3–7.8 cm), and relatively small thickness (0.8 cm), also do not correspond to the characteristics of an actual weapon. In its central part, the hilt is decorated on both sides with two parallel, relief, vertically dissected fillets ranging in width from 0.6 to 0.7 cm. The dissection seems to have been performed arbitrarily, hence the fillets look like chains of small squares and rectangles. There is a massive bar-like pommel on top of the hilt, with a slightly sub-oval cross-section. The pommel is 14.2 cm long, the width at the ends is 2.7 cm, and in its central part 2.5 cm (visually, the difference of 2 mm cannot be recognized). The thickness of the finial, just like that of the hilt, is 0.8 cm.

Between the hilt and the blade, a massive zoomorphic guard is arranged, which divides the sword into two unequal parts and has an obvious semantic meaning (Fig. 9, 10). The guard is made in the form of symmetrically arranged bear-heads bowed downwards. The heads look very realistic*, with typical foreheads and clearly-protruding small rounded ears (see Fig. 6, 9, 10). Small oval eyes, nostrils, and closed mouths are conveyed in a realistic manner.

*S.K. Vasiliev, a Candidate in Biological Sciences, considers that these heads, depicted by an ancient artisan, represent brown bear. I thank S.K. Vasiliev for a comprehensive consultation.



Fig. 9. The guard from the front side (a) and from the back side (b).

The central part of the guard, between the hilt and the blade, reveals images of a face depicted on both sides of the sword (see Fig. 2, 9, 10). This is a stylized representation of an anthropomorphic creature whose eyes and mouth are conveyed in the form of lens-shaped ovals. Evidently the face is a pivotal image on the sword, that immediately compels attention. It is of interest to note that the “fracture” line, dividing the upper and central parts of the piece, runs across the mouth of the face (see Fig. 2, a; 3, 9). Furthermore, the prominent guard transforms smoothly into the stiffening-rib of the sword, which, gradually tapering, runs on both sides along the center of the blade up to the point (see Fig. 2). The rib is flattened from above and, when nearing the end, becomes more oval in shape.

In fact, the sword’s blade is represented by two fragments. Its total length (from the blade origin to its point) is 47.9 cm: the central part is 32.2 cm long (see Fig. 4), and the lower (piercing) one is 15.7 cm long (see Fig. 5). In cross-section, the blade shows a flattened form, gradually tapering towards the edges and rounded along the cutting rim, which, in contrast to the edges of any actual cut-and-thrust weapon, remained blunt. Again, this last feature emphasizes the ritual meaning of the piece, and suggests that we are dealing with a non-combat weapon. Maximum blade-thickness in the section adjacent to the hilt (together with the stiffening rib) is 0.75–0.80 cm. The major part of the blade’s width (2/3) remains almost unchanged, and ranges from 6.7 to 7.3 cm. The lower part of the blade proves to be thinner, ranging from 0.35–0.37 cm.

Analogs and challenges in archaeological dating

This sword has no absolute analogs. Some features of its form may be considered to be epochal, allowing

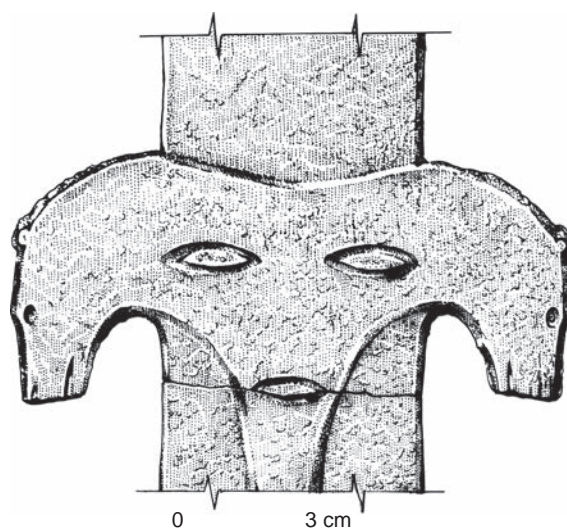


Fig. 10. Drawing of the guard: the front side.

one to infer both chronological attribution and spatial distribution of such artifacts.

According to a classification by M.I. Gorelik, the piece should be attributed to the short swords (50–70 cm—short, 70–90 cm—optimum, over 90 cm—long) (2003: 215). The size and design of the sword show a resemblance to the acinaces, a Scythian type of sword. Data obtained by A.I. Melyukova indicate that the majority of Scythian swords are from 50 to 70 cm in length (1964: 46).

In spite of its uniqueness, the discussed sword from the Cis-Baikal region is quite comparable to Scythian swords, by a number of criteria. The latter swords were usually manufactured from iron, though some bronze specimens are known as well (Ibid.). According to Melyukova’s classification of such type of weaponry, the sword under study should be assigned to the first group, which includes articles with a straight bar-like pommel (Ibid.: 47). Types comprised in each group of

the classification can be recognized by a rather stable form of a guard (kidney-shaped, butterfly-shaped, or quasitriangular); though it is evident that the sword from the Cis-Baikal region cannot be assigned to any of these types. However, Melyukova indicates that pieces with guards of a peculiar form were identified among Scythian swords (Ibid.). For example, she mentions a sword with a guard interpreted as the “very stylized heads of two birds of prey, which can be perceived as eagles or griffons, with spiral-shaped beaks and one large eye in the center” (Ibid.: 53). This sword appears to have been manufactured under the influence of the Siberian acinaces (Ibid.). Indeed, it was the bronze dagger-acinaces found in Siberia that revealed characteristic guards, made in the form of heads of birds and beasts of prey turned in opposite directions. Such articles are listed in the monograph by M.V. Gorelik (2003: Table XII). Unfortunately, the detailed drawings published in the book are extremely schematic. However, it is clearly seen that at least six pieces (three of them originating from the Minusinsk basin, one from the Ob River basin in Novosibirsk region, and two from Ordos Desert) have guards implemented in the form of small heads of a wolf (?), feline predators (lions?), or a wild boar; and also as whole figurines of animals and stylized images (Ibid.). Evidently, all these representations embody “characters” typical of the Scytho-Siberian animal style. In the context of this study, it is important that the aforesaid articles occur within the time-period of the 5th–3rd centuries BC. Scholars K.T. Smirnov and V.G. Petrenko assign the Savromatian swords with bar-like pommels on the hilts to the 7th–6th centuries BC; although such swords were also used by Savromatians later, in the 5th–6th centuries BC (Smirnov, Petrenko, 1963: Table 11, 1–6, 14, 43). A guard made in the form of small bear-heads has never been found before. The image of the “taiga-owner” (i.e. the bear) represented on the sword suggests that the latter was manufactured in the taiga zone, perhaps, in Eastern Siberia.

It seems that the Scythian Age is exactly the time to which the sword under study should be dated, as it contains a bar-like pommel, and a cross-guard designed in the form of realistically-conveyed bear-heads. It is obvious that the main character selected by a craftsman reflects the local realities and a special attitude towards the most important taiga-dweller.

As regards the analogs of the sword under study, they can be found among the evidence derived from the area to the north of Lake Baikal. Bronze pieces of “large size and peculiar shape” (accidental finds) were discovered as long ago as the 19th century in Yakutia (Alekseyev, Gogolev, Zykov, 1991: 8). Among these, a massive bronze celt found at the mouth of the Kolyma River (Okladnikov, 1944) was perhaps one of the first such finds. However, five bronze swords from Yakutia are considered to be the best-known, each of them showing the distinguishing

features. (The most comprehensive data on these swords are provided in the studies by I.V. Leskova, S.A. Fedoseyeva (1985), and V.I. Ertyukov (1990: 79–81)). Researchers tried to find the analogs of these swords in the areas to the south of Yakutia; but samples obtained from these regions revealed only a remote resemblance to those from Yakutia, which allowed only an outline of the time-frames of their existence. Taking into consideration the chronological reference-points established for such types of article from Southern and Western Siberia, two of them can be attributed to the Late Bronze Age (end of the Karasuk period)–Early Iron Age (the Tagar period)*. With regards to the swords found in the Aldan River basin (Ukulaan sword) and the Lena River basin (Sendele sword), my point is that these articles are absolutely unique, and require special consideration.

The bronze sword found in the Vilyuy River basin near Lake Khotu-Talaakh, and referred to as the “Khotu-Talaakh sword” (Borisov, 1961), bears the closest resemblance to the sword under study; although, in contrast to the Cis-Baikal one, it has a ring-shaped pommel, which allowed V.G. Borisov to compare the Khotu-Talaakh sword with those associated with the Karasuk and Tagar cultures (Ibid.). Borisov suggested dating the find to the terminal phase of the Karasuk culture, or the early 1st millennium BC (Ibid.: 241).

From my point of view, the Khotu-Talaakh sword is closer to the Tagar specimens than to Karasuk. It has not only an exaggeratedly large pommel and a pronounced stiffening-rib, but also a distinctive cross-guard, atypical of earlier Karasuk daggers. Similar specimens can be found, though rarely, among the Tagar weaponry from the Minusinsk basin (Chlenova, 1992: Table 84, 17), particularly in collections of the Early Scythian articles found in Tuva (Mandelshtam, 1992: Table 84, 17). The Scythian early (iron) swords-acinaces, dating as far back as the 5th–4th centuries BC, also reveal such cross-guards (Melyukova, 1989: Table 32, 1). The foregoing allows dating of the Khotu-Talaakh sword to no earlier than the 7th century BC. Taking into account the Tagar analogs, one may suggest that the Khotu-Talaakh swords could have existed before the 3rd century BC.

The Cis-Baikal and Khotu-Talaakh swords are quite comparable in their proportions (though the latter is somewhat smaller: its overall length is 56.4 cm). Both have a disproportionately wide and flat grip, which makes their combat-use impossible. It should be noted that the Khotu-Talaakh sword, just like the Cis-Baikal one, was found stuck into the ground under a tree-root (Arkhipov, 1994: 7). This fact implies their semantic similarity as well.

*Remember that periodization of the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age of Yakutia differs from the traditional periodization used for Southern and Western Siberia.

The short iron swords found in the taiga-zone of Western Siberia can also be considered analogous to the sword under study. Firstly, their similarity is revealed by the straight bar-like pommel of the hilt (Soloviev, 2003: Fig. 110). It is also very important that in this region of Asia swords appear to have been used during the Early Iron Age not only as weapons, but also as sacred items, which is supported by their representations (together with faces) in the centers of the breastplates of the armor attributed to the Ust-Polui (Moshinskaya, 1953) and Kulai (Troitskaya, 1979) cultures.

Semantics

A sword is a widespread symbol in mythology and world religions (Meilakh, 1982: 149). Cults associated with the sword proliferated rather broadly both temporally and spatially. Their origins should be probably sought in the Late Bronze Age, a time when this type of weaponry first appeared. Undoubtedly, the flourishing of ritual practices involving a sword occurred in the Scythian Age, when they spread throughout the whole area inhabited by the Scytho-Siberian community.

During the early and late Middle Ages, many peoples of Eurasia had developed a special attitude to the sword. It was a symbol of power, courage, justice, and truth, as well as a phallic symbol. Special swords “endowed with supernatural powers” (O’Connell, Airey, 2009: 20) are thought to have been in use as well. In addition, a sword was always used for ceremonial purposes (Ibid.: 226). Rituals involving a sword or a saber are also known to have been used by Siberian peoples; drastically transformed, these have been preserved to the present day (Baulo, 2004: 101). I think that it is the semantics that draw particular attention to the sword under study.

The bronze sword found on the northern shore of Lake Baikal, as noted, has proven to be unique. Such features as the original tripartite structure, nonfunctional blade and hilt, peculiarly designed guard, and stylized faces represented in the central part of the cross-guard, suggest that the sword was manufactured not for combat, but most likely for sacred purposes. It should be remembered that, when discovered, the point of the sword was stuck into the ground, while the other parts were found lying nearby, under stones. Recall that a bronze sword discovered in the Vilyuy basin was also found stuck into the ground.

The morphological similarity of the swords from the Cis-Baikal region and the area to the north of the lake is probably not a coincidence. Most likely, it was in the taiga-zone (perhaps Yakutia) that the sword originated. This is indicated by two dissected fillets decorating the sword’s hilt (see Fig. 4). It should be mentioned that such appliqué fillets are characteristic of pottery associated

with the Ust-Mil culture in Yakutia* (Fedoseyeva, 1970, 1974; Ertyukov, 1990: 96; and others).

The Cis-Baikal sword, as noted above, may confidently be dated to the Scythian Age (the 5th–3rd centuries BC). In the light of this information, its usage in ritual practices doesn’t look like anything unusual. According to written sources, the Scythians used the swords-acinaces for ritual purposes. Herodotus, their contemporary, wrote in “The Histories” about rituals associated with the sword: “...but to Ares [they sacrifice] as follows: In each district of the several governments they have a temple of Ares set up in this way: bundles of brushwood are heaped up for about three furlongs in length and in breadth, but less in height; and on the top of this there is a level square made, and three of the sides rise sheer but by the remaining one side the pile may be ascended. Every year they pile on a hundred and fifty wagon-loads of brushwood, for it is constantly settling down by reason of the weather. Upon this pile of which I speak each people has an ancient iron sword set up, and this is the sacred symbol of Ares. To this sword they bring yearly offerings of cattle and of horses; and they have the following sacrifice in addition, beyond what they make to the other gods; that is to say, of all the enemies whom they take captive in war they sacrifice one man in every hundred, not in the same manner as they sacrifice cattle, but in a different manner: for they first pour wine over their heads, and after that they cut the throats of the men, so that the blood runs into a bowl; and then they carry this up to the top of the pile of brushwood and pour the blood over the sword...” (Hdt. IV. 62, trans. by G. Macaulay).

It is important to bear in mind that the Scythians practiced various ritual manipulations involving a sword. “In the following manner the Scythians make oaths to whomsoever they make them,” Herodotus wrote. “They pour wine into a great earthenware cup and mingle with it blood of those who are taking the oath to one another... and then they dip into the cup a sword and arrows and a battle-axe and a javelin; and having done this, they invoke many curses on the breaker of the oath, and afterwards they drink it off, both those who are making the oath and the most honorable of their company” (Ibid.: 70).

The ritual use of a sword is also reported in more recent Roman sources. For instance, it is indicated that the Scythians could have dedicated a sword to Mars (Latyshev, 1904: 123; 1906: 276). In addition, Roman

*Researchers assign the Ust-Mil culture to the Bronze Age, though articles associated with it appear to have existed in the regions to the south of Yakutia during the Scythian Age and, partly, even in the Hun-Sarmatian period. Therefore it cannot be ruled out that both articles and ideas that didn’t already relate to the Bronze Age could have been brought into the northern regions.

historians noted the following: (1) nations that appeared later than the Scythians seem to have continued an ancient tradition of worshipping a sword associated with Mars. Ammianus Marcellinus wrote about the Alans that they worshipped a naked sword fixed upright in the ground; considering it, with Mars, to be the guardian of the countries through which they roved (Latyshev, 1906: 342). Clement of Alexandria pointed out that many tribes, having stuck a sword into the ground, made sacrifices to it as to Ares; Sarmatians who were closely-related to the Scythians worshipped a sword (Latyshev, 1893: 596); (2) the swords used for worshipping were not regular, but special. It appears that the legends associated with Attila's discovery of his sword, which belonged to Mars and was "considered sacramental among the Scythian rulers" (Prisk Paniysky..., 1956), and made him "mighty in wars" (Jordan..., 1960: 102), had some basis in reality. Apparently, in order to emphasize the sacral function of a sword, it was purposely made in an unusual shape.

It is quite likely that the sword had played a special semantic role also in the region to the north of the Scytho-Siberian traditions area—perhaps as long ago as the Karasuk period. Precisely this may be evidenced by the Karasuk bronze swords, discovered in the East-Siberian taiga (Yakutia). Their shape and size are unusual even for the territory where the Karasuk weapon had originally appeared. A.P. Okladnikov wrote about these finds: "By its size, proportions, perfection of forms, and elaborated finishing, it (a sword found in the 19th century as far as 160 km from the city of Vilyuysk at the bottom of drained off Lake Silgumdzha – **M.V.**) is a one-of-a-kind specimen representing the casting-art of Siberian craftsmen of the Bronze Age. Moreover, bronze swords comparable to this one in terms of size and delicate finishing have been found neither in Siberia, nor throughout the whole forest zone of the Soviet Union"* (1949: 149).

In the light of the stated hypothesis, a bronze Karasuk sword found in Tomsk in a city park called Lagerny Sad (which appears to have been used as sacral in ancient times) is of undeniable interest. This sword consists of three parts (the fourth—the hilt fragment—is probably lost) (Soloviev, 2003: Fig. 43) and is semantically comparable to the aforesaid sword from the Cis-Baikal region.

Turning to the sword under study, it should be emphasized that the context of the find suggests the manifestation of some ritual that involved sticking a

sword into the ground, and implied its use in multipartite (damaged) condition. The Cis-Baikal sword exhibits a remarkable and very important subject, a face depicted between the heads of two bears (see Fig. 9, 10). As was mentioned above, images of faces and swords on the breastplates of armor used by Ust-Polui and Kulai people in the taiga-zone of Western Siberia indicate that this semantic subject has its roots in antiquity, being coeval with the sword from the Cis-Baikal region. In addition, the sword under study seems to integrate these two most important symbols into one whole. The images of bear-heads may have added the semantic composition embodied in the sword.

The face on the analyzed sword (which appears to be the main character) shows a schematic representation. The craftsman conveyed only the eyes and the mouth, showing no additional details; however, the convex guard, gradually transforming into the stiffening-rib, is interpreted as a unique image of the quite complete face. Such an iconographic personification of the image is characteristic of the northern taiga cultures in Eurasia and, perhaps, more consistent with the East-Siberian casting style recognized by Okladnikov (1948: 216). In any case, this is exactly how eyes and mouths portrayed in the form of almond-shaped ovals featuring the bronze representations of faces from Eastern Siberia are interpreted (Ibid.: Fig. 1–4 and others). It should be noted that extremely stylized faces are known, which similarly show only the eyes and the mouth (Ibid.: Fig. 7, 8). Okladnikov not only correctly associated the East-Siberian bronze faces with the Scythian Age, but also convincingly argued that they can be attributed to "shamanic images" (Ibid.: 219). In this regard, it is possible to link the Cis-Baikal sword to shamanic attributes. It could even be compared to shamanic staffs showing representations of a human face (Ibid.: 224).

The tradition of leaving weapon (swords and sabers) at sanctuaries is typical of the Ugric population in the taiga-zone of Western Siberia. This is confirmed by information available from ethnographic sources. Professor A.V. Baulo, a renowned expert in the field of Siberian ethnography, notes: "In the shamanic practices of the Ugric people who inhabited the Ob River basin in the northern part of Western Siberia, a saber is as commonly used as a drum" (2004: 107). Weapons attributed to a familiar spirit of the Lyapin Mansi, which have been described in a monograph by I.N. Gemuev and A.M. Sagalaev, included a double-edged iron sword, an iron saber with the hilt made of antler, and a wooden scabbard with the remains of a sword made of wood; in addition to an iron battle-axe, an iron glaive-like weapon, and arrows with iron arrowheads (1986: 20–23). Interestingly, a saber was used by shamans in various rituals (fortune-telling, or interacting with the spirits in an altered state of consciousness) (Baulo, 2004: 108).

*It should be noted that all the remarkable bronze articles from Yakutia known to date (swords, javelins, celts, a cauldron), many of them revealing unusual shape and size, are chance finds discovered beyond the archaeological complexes. Does this not give an indication that all these objects had a sacral meaning and were used at sanctuaries?

It cannot be ruled out that the Cis-Baikal sword was the embodiment of a deity. The most illustrative example of such syncretism among the Mansi living in the Severnaya Sosva River basin can be found in the materials of Gemuev. A long narrow iron blade was made in the shape of a deity-figure. The hilt was designed as the deity's hands. The hilt reveals the attached head, with the eyes and mouth designated by egg-shaped impressions (1990: 134–135). A large number of examples showing the embodiment of a deity-image in weaponry (saber) is discussed in the study by Baulo (2004: 105–106).

In addition to the face, representations of two bear-heads occupy a central place on the sword from the Cis-Baikal region. The face and the bears comprise the hilt of the ritual sword. The custom among various people of the Siberian taiga-zone was to embody the head of the “taiga-owner” in metal figurines (see, e.g., (Narody Sibiri..., 2000)). Judging by the finds discovered at sanctuaries, bronze plaques with bear-images appear to have been used by indigenous populations in ritual practices since ancient times (see, e.g., (Molodin, Bobrov, Ravnushkin, 1980)). Such plaques are used in modern-day rituals as well (Baulo, 2004: 81–82). The northern Khanty people believed that the image of a bear could protect against the “attacks of evil forces” (Ibid.). The image of a bear represented on the find from the Cis-Baikal region could have played a protective role, or emphasized the might and power of the sword. It is known that peoples associated with the cultures of the Scytho-Siberian animal-style commonly decorated the cross-guard of a sword or a dagger-acinaces with an image of the head of a beast, or a bird of prey. Notably, the image of a bear had never been used by them, as it was not typical of sacral images of the Scytho-Siberian world. But for indigenous people living in the northern area of the Siberian taiga, the bear still remains a particularly respected animal.

Thus, it may be suggested that the sword from the Cis-Baikal region demonstrates a manifestation of syncretism that can be linked to both the southern Scytho-Siberian traditions (where the sword played an important semantic role) and to the northern ones (shamanic rituals practiced by the taiga population). This is not surprising, for according to the mythology of the Kets and Buryats it was a shaman who led the army and personally participated in combat actions (Anuchin, 1914: 40–41; Okladnikov, 1948: 220). All of the foregoing confirms the conclusion inferred by Okladnikov that “cultures of the Scythian steppe had a direct influence on the indigenous culture of the taiga tribes” (1948: 225).

A special problem is the reconstruction of ritual practices associated with the intentional damage of things. And while the ethnographic literature provides a lot of data to explain such a practice in the burial-rites of people representing various archaeological cultures of Siberia

and the Russian Far East, in our case things seem to be more complicated. However, some versions offering an interpretation of this phenomenon can still be suggested. It is important that rituals involving damaging things were practiced by people who inhabited the taiga-zone (though in Western, rather than Eastern, Siberia). Thus, according to V.N. Chernetsov, sacral figurines of wolves with intentionally broken backs were found in the Irtysh River basin (1941: 26). Especially important information is provided in a monograph by Baulo. He refers to data obtained by A. Kannisto about Prince Tek, a familiar spirit of the Vogul village, whose sword was placed into sacrificial storage after being broken in the fight with an evil spirit (Baulo, 2004: 103). Also, there are data about the placement of iron swords with broken sabers (Gemuev, Baulo, 1999: 30–31) and without hilts (Baulo, 2004: 104) at the Mansi sanctuaries. It cannot be ruled out that the semantics of the tripartite Cis-Baikal sword are associated with some such phenomena.

Conclusions

The discussed sword was intentionally manufactured in three parts. Its appearance suggests that it can be dated back to Scythian times. The sword demonstrates an unequivocal syncretism of mythological settings resulting from the Scytho-Siberian impact from Southern Siberia, which was probably also manifested in worship involving a sword (sticking it into the ground, followed by some mysteries). It is important that its iconography (a face, bear-heads, ribbed fillets on the hilt) reflects subjects associated with the taiga.

Such syncretism allows us to infer that the Cis-Baikal sword could have been used extensively in some rituals. Those could have been both fortune-telling with a sword, and rituals practiced during the bear-festivals, which currently involve mysteries that include manipulations with bladed side-arms—specifically, with sabers (Baulo, 2004: 102). According to some researchers, they appeared in the taiga zone of Western Siberia in the Early Iron Age (see, e.g., (Moshinskaya, 1953: 100)), or perhaps earlier. It appears that the intentional partition (damage) of the sword had some purpose, undoubtedly filled with a sacral meaning.

Acknowledgement

Doctor of Historical Sciences Professor German Ivanovich Medvedev passed away suddenly on February 21, 2015. I didn't have time to show him this article, which he inspired by giving to the institute this remarkable bronze sword found on the shore of Lake Baikal. May this publication, dedicated to a unique find that was in fact saved by German Ivanovich, be a remembrance of this excellent scholar, teacher, and person.

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