

## HELLENISTIC PHALERAE FROM THE BURIALS OF THE NOMADS OF ASIAN SARMATIA

The paper is devoted to silver *phalerae* from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC nomadic burials in the vast territory of Eurasia: the burials concerned form an enormous arc stretching from the interfluvium of the Lower Volga and the Ural River in the West to the east bank of the Irtysh in the East (Fig. 1, 1)<sup>1</sup>.

The *phalerae* feature similar dimensions (ca. 23–25 cm in diameter), construction (three riveted loops on the rear) and manufacturing techniques and were used to disentangle the harness straps on horses' shoulders. A characteristic feature of the *phalerae* in the group under discussion is the 'mirror-image' principle for the depiction—figures shown in profile facing left on one *phalera* and facing right on the other. However, the images were not mechanically mirror-reflected—that is clearly seen in the details<sup>2</sup>. The composition found in two pairs of *phalerae* with scenes of fighting animals, originating from Hoard I in the J. Paul Getty Museum and assumed to be of Parthian workmanship is also based on the same principle<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Treister (2012: 51–109, especially pp. 65–67) with bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Treister (2012: 67–69).

<sup>3</sup> Pfrommer (1993: 155–160, nos. 30–33).

They are decorated either with Greek mythological compositions (Bellerophon fighting Chimaira: Volodarka, Western Kazakhstan—Fig. 2, 1–2<sup>4</sup>), with a scene showing an elephant with mahout (Fig. 2, 3)<sup>5</sup> or with the images of a coiled griffin (Novouzensk, lower reaches of the Volga—Fig. 3, 3–4<sup>6</sup>; Sidorovka, east bank of the Irtysh—Fig. 3, 2<sup>7</sup>), a griffin with the body of sea monster (now in the Museum of Novocherkassk, perhaps originating from the Lower Don area—Fig. 3, 1<sup>8</sup>), or with that of a feline (unknown findspot on the bank of the River Ishim—Fig. 2, 4<sup>9</sup>).

The composition with a Bellerophon on Pegasus fighting Chimera, as on the pair from Volodarka, which was characterized by J. Boardman as an aggressively Hellenistic motif<sup>10</sup>, represents a subject, which can be found in Attic art as far back as in the Archaic and Classical periods. It was especially widespread in Classical art of the 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, and although it was less popular in the Hellenistic period it was widely spread from Italy in the west to the East Mediterranean and the Near East. The craftsman creating these *phalerae* reproduced it virtually without introducing any innovations of his own<sup>11</sup>.

Also the motif of the elephant *phalerae* finds prototypes in the Hellenistic art, and not only in the East<sup>12</sup>, but also in Greece and Italy, as on terracotta figurines and on the so-called ‘elephant plates’. At least one of the figurines (from Thessalonike) found in a well dated context had been manufactured shortly after 277 BC and probably may be associated with the use of war elephants by Antogonus Gonatas in the siege of Megara in 275 BC, while plates may have belonged to a series created to celebrate the triumph in

<sup>4</sup> Mordvinceva (2001: 14, 35, figs. 6, 3; 75, no. 36, pls.16–17); Treister (2012: 69–77).

<sup>5</sup> Spitsyn (1909: 49, figs. 74–76); Treister (1999: 582–589; 2012, 66, note 16) with bibliography; Mordvinceva (2001: 74, no. 32, pl. 13).

<sup>6</sup> Spitsyn (1909: 51, fig. 79); Treister (1999: 67, note 18) with bibliography; Mordvinceva (2001: 75, no. 33, pl. 14).

<sup>7</sup> Matyushchenko & Tataurova (1997: 12, 47, 141–142, figs. 18–20); Treister (1999: 67, note 19) with bibliography; Mordvinceva (2001: 75, No. 35, pl. 15).

<sup>8</sup> Ilyukov (2000: 133–135); Dedyul'kin (2015: 131–133, fig. 2).

<sup>9</sup> Mordvintseva et al (1997: 176–180); Treister (2012: 96–100); Seitov (2013: 193–200).

<sup>10</sup> Boardman (2015: 105–106, fig. 55).

<sup>11</sup> Treister (2012: 69–77).

<sup>12</sup> Treister (1999: 582–589); Boardman (2015: 103–105, fig. 53).

275 BC of the famous Roman general Curius Dentatus over King Pyrrhus of Epirus, who had first brought elephants to Italy for use in warfare against the Romans<sup>13</sup>).

As regards the images of the sea monsters, as on the *phalerae* from the Museum of Novocherkassk, we do not find those of such creatures, a so-called ‘sea griffin’ (*Meeresgreif*) neither among examples of toreutics in the so-called Graeco-Scythian style, nor in Graeco-Roman toreutics of the Classical period. Similar images of ‘sea griffins’ first appear in the Hellenistic period and become more widespread in Roman art of the Imperial period. Further development of this image in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC art of Pontic area may be seen in the images on the lid of the silver goblet from Kosika and on the silver vessel once in the collection of S. I. Grigoryants<sup>14</sup>). In a certain way an image of a sea griffin corresponds to that of a ketos, engraved on a saddlecloth of the elephant on the *phalerae* from the Siberian collection<sup>15</sup>).

The images of griffins on the *phalerae* from Novouzensk were characterized by J. Boardman as ‘Greek-style subjects’, while he stressed that ‘the distortion of the griffin is in keeping with the taste of the nomad rather than Persian or Indian’<sup>16</sup>).

The compositional arrangement of the image of a feline on the *phalerae* found on the bank of the River Ishim has been used above all in the Animal Style of Central Asia<sup>17</sup>).

All the images on these *phalerae*, except for those with a coiled griffin, are shown in the medallions: the depictions are framed by a ridge in the form of a wreath, are usually gilded.

A garland with ties is a motif which began to be used in toreutics as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and became fairly widespread in the Hellenistic period;

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<sup>13</sup>) Treister (1999: 583–584 with bibliography). See most recently on terracotta figurines of elephants: Ambrosini (2005b: 193, 199, pl. IV, *d*); Lambrothanasasi & Toulountzidou (2016: 94–99, no. 18, figs. 21–23). See on the ‘elephant plates: Ambrosini (2005a: 172–173, figs. 14–16; 176); Ambrosini (2005b: 192–193, 199, pl. IV, *e-g*); Pergamon (2016: 118–119, no. 21).

<sup>14</sup>) Treister (2005: 217); Treister (2007: 49, no. D3.1, col. pl. 18); see also Boardman (2015: 107, fig. 57).

<sup>15</sup>) See above note 5.

<sup>16</sup>) Boardman (1994: 107).

<sup>17</sup>) Treister (2012: 97–98).

this applied *inter alia*, to the shape of the friezes on the inner surface of bowls and on *phalerae*<sup>18</sup>).

A very close parallel for the depiction of leaves on the garland of the Volodarka *phalerae* and the only one known to me is provided by a garland decorating a silver *rhyton* in the shape of a bull's head and of unknown origin acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1987. This *rhyton* was given a wide date range by M. Pfrommer—from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, while the scholar at the same time did not rule out the possibility that it could date from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC<sup>19</sup>). The only point, with which it is possible to agree, is that, on the basis of its shape, the *rhyton* could be considered as belonging to a post-Achaemenid tradition. In this respect it is worth considering that the workshop, in which the *rhyton* was made, could have been in the Near East or possibly Iran.

On the *phalerae* with a depiction of elephants there are six wide ties decorated with dots—which therefore means that the Volodarka *phalerae* and the *phalerae* bearing a depiction of elephants differ from each other with regard to their decorative friezes. Examples of garlands, the base of which consisted of 'plait pattern' or patterns of dots (which we come across on the garland of the elephant *phalerae*) derived from the latter, are quite rare<sup>20</sup>) and among them there are garlands on the Parthian (?) conical bowls: from Hoard I in the Getty Museum<sup>21</sup>) and from the nomad burial in Burial-mound 4 of the Maierovskii III Burial-ground in the Volga region<sup>22</sup>) (Fig. 4, 2).

Significantly different is the wreath on the *phalerae* found on the bank of the Ishim river,<sup>23</sup>) which varies from the garlands found in toreutics, which can be designated as Parthian<sup>24</sup>). The latter are even difficult to regard as models for imitation, which a craftsman might use, when making a *phalera*. The motif used to frame a composition has no specific elements which might reflect its link to the art of Graeco-Bactria. There are more grounds for suggesting that the garland variant which became widespread in Asia Minor or the Eastern

<sup>18</sup>) Treister (2012: 77–80).

<sup>19</sup>) Pfrommer (1993: 67–68, 220–221, no. 128; pl. 8; tracing—p. 233); Manassero (2008: 191, no. 1; 208, pl. 54, 1).

<sup>20</sup>) See in detail: Treister (2009: 116–117).

<sup>21</sup>) Pfrommer (1993: 151, no. 24).

<sup>22</sup>) Skvorcov & Skripkin (2006: 258, no. 14; 259, fig. 14, 2; 261, fig. 18).

<sup>23</sup>) See above note 9.

<sup>24</sup>) Cf. Pfrommer (1993: 36–38, nos. 1–2, 17, 69–70).

Mediterranean could serve as a prototype for framing decoration<sup>25)</sup>—the closest parallel is the applied garland of the silver bowl from the Sarmatian barrow at Verkhnee Pogromnoe in the Lower Volga area (Fig. 4, 1)—this bowl may be dated already to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and was most probably manufactured in one of the East Mediterranean of Asia Minor centres<sup>26)</sup>. However this type of the garland, though in somewhat simplified form, was used for the decoration of terracotta<sup>27)</sup> and glass vessels<sup>28)</sup> at least to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. What points even more clearly to the absence of any Graeco-Bactrian links is the central depiction on the *phalera*: we might refer to the Central-Asian origin of this arrangement for the depiction of animals, to the fact that it was used by at least several different craftsmen, who made articles in the polychrome Animal Style from the Siberian Collection. There are grounds for assuming that this arrangement of the composition was used by the craftsmen making *phalerae*, which were classified as Parthian<sup>29)</sup>.

Most of the *phalerae* were weighed and appraised. The table shows that the differences in the weights of the *phalerae* are considerable (from 390 to 634.5 gram, deviation almost 63%), particularly when the fact that their dimensions are fairly similar (diameters range from 22.8 to 24.7 cm, deviation

No.	Findspot	Map (fig.1)	Illustrations	Weight /1(g)	Weight /2(g)	Diameter (cm)
1	Unknown. Museum Novocherkassk		Fig. 3, 1	391.2	390	23.3–23.5/ 23.0–23.3
2	Novouzensk	no. 1	Fig. 3, 3–4	404.2	407.9	24.0/24.0
3	Volodarka	no. 2	Fig. 2, 1–2	unknown	490.9	23.7/23.5
4	Ishim	no. 3	Fig. 2, 4	540.2	555.76	23.1–23.9/ 22.8–23.7/
5	Sidorovka	no. 4	Fig. 3, 2	unknown	unknown	23.0
6	Siberian collection		Fig. 2, 3	627.8	634.5	24.7/24.7
				<b>Total</b>	<b>390.0–634.5</b>	<b>22.8–24.7</b>

<sup>25)</sup> Treister (2012: 96–97).

<sup>26)</sup> Treister (2007: 27–28, no. A32.1 with bibliography, col. pl. 15).

<sup>27)</sup> See, e.g., a *skyphos* from Olbia, dated to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC with a reduced variant of such motif: Zhuravlev (2015: 196–197, 199, fig. 7, 2; col. pl. 7, fig. 6, 2).

<sup>28)</sup> See, e.g. a cast conical glass bowl from the shipwreck at Antikythera: Avronidaki (2012: 138, no. 100).

<sup>29)</sup> Treister (2012: 98–100).

ca. 8%) is taken into account. That means that the group may not be considered as homogenous.

What is important, the weight data of the *phalerae* in the group under discussion differ considerably from the weight of the 'Parthian' *phalerae* from Hoard I in the J. Paul Getty Museum. The two *phalerae* with scenes of a lion attacking a deer weigh 137.3 and 140.3 grams respectively and their diameters measure 15 and 15.2 cm<sup>30)</sup>; those of the second pair weigh 98 and 104 grams and their diameters measure 12.6 cm<sup>31)</sup>. In any case what we see here is that there are clear differences in both the dimensions and the weights of the *phalerae*, which scholars had classified as works from 'Graeco-Bactrian' and 'Parthian' workshops. Naturally the question remains open as to whether these differences testify to specific standards typical for Bactria and Parthia, or whether it is more likely that they reflect chronological differences.

The analyses of the remaining gold and silver plate from Graeco-Bactria and Parthia does not allow us to come to the definite conclusions. Which of the pieces of art-work in silver dating from the Hellenistic period and presumed to have been found in the territory of modern Iran and Afghanistan can be classified as stemming from Graeco-Bactrian workshops and which to have originated in Parthian workshops is thus an extremely complex question and can only be resolved on the basis of multi-disciplinary stylistic and technological research of a whole mass of material, which has not yet been carried out. We should also not lose sight of the fact that in the Eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, schools of toreutics existed with traditions going back many centuries and that the items created in them could also have made their way to the Middle East and from there to the Urals, the lower reaches of the Volga and to Western Siberia<sup>32)</sup>.

Let us now return to our *phalerae*. The attribution of the rhyton in the form of a bull's head from the J. Paul Getty Museum collection, in view of the fact that the garland decorating it is closest in its execution to the garland on the Volodarka *phalerae*, may suggest that the item was made in a Parthian workshop: it does not, however, enable us once and for all to determine that the *phalerae* were made in Parthia<sup>33)</sup>. What might tip the scales in the case of the Volodarka *phalerae* could be, together with all reservations regarding

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<sup>30)</sup> Pfrommer (1993: 155, nos. 30–31).

<sup>31)</sup> Pfrommer (1993: 158, nos. 32–33).

<sup>32)</sup> Treister (2012: 83–85).

<sup>33)</sup> Treister (2012: 86–87).

the hypothetical nature of such a suggestion, another find from the same burial, namely the long sword of possible Chinese origin or an imitation of it. Swords of this kind, as well as other items of Chinese armour, have been recorded in nomad assemblages of the period under discussion in the Urals region, in the lower reaches of the Volga and in Western Siberia and they are classified, if not as Chinese items, at least as imitations of the latter. Finds of long swords of this kind in conjunction with daggers have been recorded in particular in the burials of noble warriors which yielded also either silver, gilded *phalerae* (Volodarka, Sidorovka) or silver bowls with gilding<sup>34</sup> of the shapes paralleled among the numerous finds from the so-called Hoard I in the J. Paul Getty Museum, assumed to date from the early Parthian period and to have originated from North-Western Iran: on many of these there are Aramaic inscriptions which indicate weight in Parthian drachms<sup>35</sup>. And one of the bowls from Isakovka bears a Parthian weight inscription<sup>36</sup>, while another—a Khorezmian weight inscription<sup>37</sup>. In this connection it is worth mentioning that both *phalerae* found on the west bank of the Ishim river also feature two identical punched Aramaic inscriptions<sup>38</sup>.

Of the six pairs of *phalerae* examined here, only two originate from known contexts in Volodarka and Sidorovka. In the first case, the *phalerae* were found between the bones of the right and left legs of the deceased elderly man at the level of the kneecaps and between the lower leg of the right leg and a clay round-bottomed vessel (Fig. 1, 2)<sup>39</sup>. In the second, they were located in the corner of the grave pit—in a bronze cauldron with the bones of a horse, iron horse-bits and iron lamellar armor ‘covered with the skin of a cow or a horse’ (fig. 1, 3)<sup>40</sup>. It is worth noting that the surface of these *phalerae*, as well as the finds from the bank of the Ishim river, does not have signs of intentional damage, although on the *phalerae* found in Sidorovka, some of the fastening loops are missing<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>) Treister (2012: 87–90).

<sup>35</sup>) Pfrommer (1993: 45–49, nos. 1–16).

<sup>36</sup>) Livshits (2003: 165–169, figs. 8–9); Koryakova (2006: 112, fig. 17).

<sup>37</sup>) Livshits (2003: 161–165, figs. 5–7); Koryakova (2006: 111, fig. 16).

<sup>38</sup>) See above note 9.

<sup>39</sup>) Gutsalov (2012: 40, fig. 6; 43).

<sup>40</sup>) Matyushchenko & Tataurova (1997: 12, 133, fig. 9).

<sup>41</sup>) Matyushchenko & Tataurova (1997: 12, 133, fig. 9).

On the *phalerae* found on the bank of the Ishim river there are cracks, dents, small ruptures of metal, but there are no signs of deliberate spoilage. The latter are abundantly present on the other three pairs of *phalerae*—with numerous wedge-shaped or diamond-shaped holes pierced from the front side and there is virtually no doubt that these *phalerae* (Novouzensk, Museum of Novocherkassk, Siberian Collection) carry traces of deliberate damage. The *phalerae*, judging by the shape of the holes, were pierced by knife indentations (Fig. 3, 1. 3–4). The closest parallel is a wedge-shaped hole in the bottom of the above-mentioned silver bowl from Maierovskii III Burial-ground (Fig. 4, 2)<sup>42</sup>. The similarity of traces of intentional damage on three pairs of *phalerae* and on a silver bowl is so great that it cannot be ruled out that these items were spoiled during the same action.

The deliberate spoilage of the funeral inventory by the Sarmatians has already been discussed<sup>43</sup>—so the traces of such damage are often noted, for example, on the mirrors<sup>44</sup>, or arms<sup>45</sup>. In this case, we are talking about deliberate damage of the elements of gala horse harness of inocultural origin. In a certain way, it can be compared with the damage of the Achaemenid plaques depicting the male figure standing on the crescent (Ahuramazda?) from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC grave at Filippovka-I burial ground in the Southern Urals—the central images of the plaques were intentionally pierced (Fig. 5). The context of the find and the state of preservation suggest that the objects that most likely originally decorated the gala dresses were torn off; their central images were pierced, and the plaques themselves were used, perhaps, in the decoration of the entrance to the funerary chamber. For all the complexity of the interpretation, such a treatment may indicate that these items fell into the hands of the nomads most probably as trophies or military booty<sup>46</sup>. Probably these three pairs of *phalerae* with traces of deliberate damage were obtained by the nomads as trophies and it cannot be ruled out that the *phalerae* found in Volodarka were also items of booty. Only in Sidorovka, judging by the location in the burial, can one assume that the *phalerae* were indeed used by the last owner for their intended purpose as elements of the horse harness.

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<sup>42</sup> See above note 22.

<sup>43</sup> As an example of a regional study, see: Bakushev (2005: 42–50).

<sup>44</sup> Khazanov (1964: 94); Kuznetsova (1988: 56–60).

<sup>45</sup> Yatsenko (2016: 36 with bibliography).

<sup>46</sup> Treister (2013: 315).



If one assumes that at least some of the *phalerae* under discussion came to the nomads as trophies, then it is difficult to assume that the motifs decorating them were somehow related to the taste of the nomads, as J. Boardman supposes in relation to the images of a curled griffin on *phalerae* from Novozuzensk<sup>47</sup>). At the same time, our assumption does not exclude the possibility that such images could have served as a source of imitation for the *phalerae*, which were made especially for the nomads. Indeed, on some *phalerae*, supposedly made in the Northern Black Sea area, we find explicit ‘barbaric’ imitations of the *phalerae* depicting curled griffins and framed with garlands. The latter include the later, dating not earlier than the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC *phalerae* depicting animals in curled poses: from a Sarmatian burial in Yashkul in Kalmykia depicting a wolf and a goat<sup>48</sup>) and from Voronezhskaya in the Kuban basin—with the image of a panther<sup>49</sup>).

As demonstrated above, there are certain difficulties involved in determining their centre of production, which make it impossible to classify them definitely as specimens of Graeco-Bactrian or Parthian toreutics. Observations regarding the style, dimensions and weight of the *phalerae* would tend to make us opt for the first alternative. The fact that we have available documentary confirmation (inscriptions both on the vessels and on the *phalerae*) of the fact that at least some of the Isakovka silver vessels probably originated from Parthia and Khorezmia, does not provide grounds for ruling out the second alternative. And there is also some indirect evidence, which does not allow us to exclude Asia Minor as one of the centres of their manufacture. One way or another, the historical context does not contradict the observations made after analysis of the *phalerae* and enables us to determine the third quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC as the *terminus ante quem* for their production, while the majority of these items which number among the most striking specimens of eastern toreutics dating from the Hellenistic period.

The spread of long swords of the type in question among the nomads of Eurasia is seen as linked to the withdrawal of certain nomad groupings from the borders of China under pressure from the Xiongnu, the conclusion being drawn that swords of that kind could not have appeared among

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<sup>47</sup>) See above note 16.

<sup>48</sup>) Otchir-Goriaeva (2002: 360–362, fig. 7; 364, fig. 9, 5–6; 379–382); Zasetskaya (2016: 90–105).

<sup>49</sup>) The Treasures (1991: no. 65); Treister (1999: 597); Mordvinceva (2001: 41–42, no. 84, pl. 46).

the Sarmatians before the middle or possibly the third quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. There are grounds for linking the appearance of silver *phalerae*, silverware and also green-glazed pottery in burials with the historical events between 145 and 120 BC, which happened after the fall of the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom and the movement of waves of the nomads westwards and the numerous collisions of the nomads with Parthia on its eastern and north-eastern borders, recorded by written sources<sup>50</sup>.

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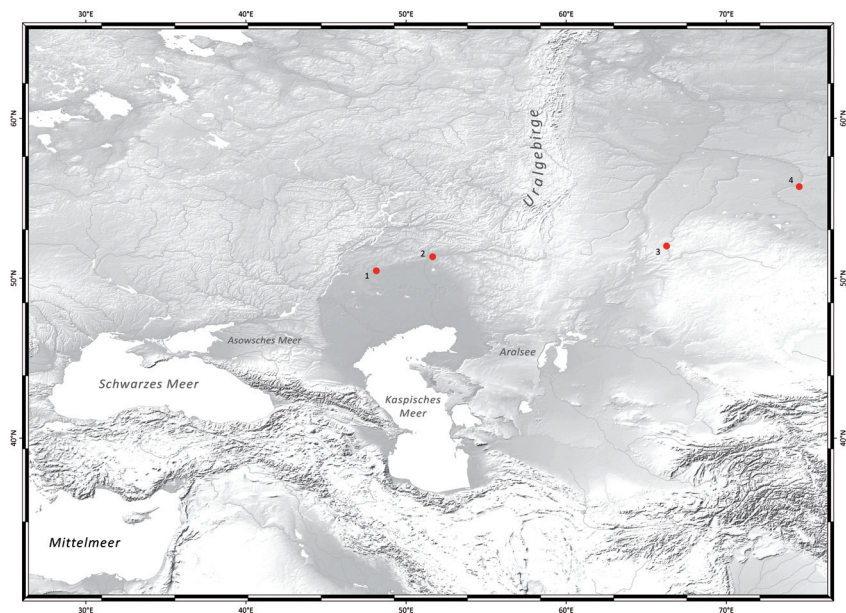
<sup>50</sup> Treister (2012: 93–95).

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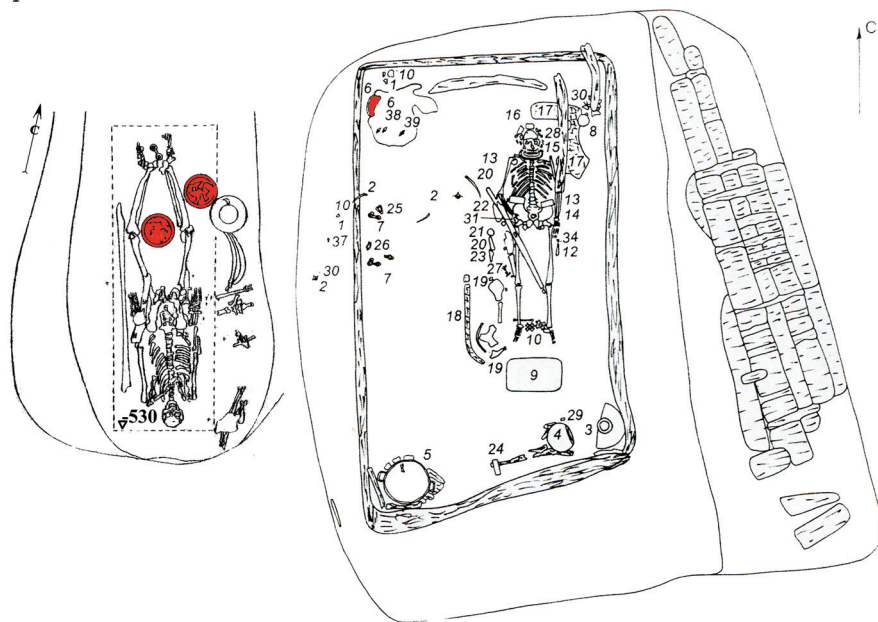
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### Abbreviations

- ACSS *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia*  
 EurA *Eurasia Antiqua*  
 RossA *Rossiiskaya Archeologiya* (Russian Archaeology)



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Fig. 1 - 1 - the distribution of phalerae. Map (Gennady Garbuzov). 1: Novouzensk, 2: Volodarka, 3: Ishim, 4: Sidorovka; 2 - Volodarka Burial-ground. Burial-mound no. 4/1981. Plan of the burial (after Gutsalov 2012: 40, fig. 6); 3 - Sidorovka, Burial-mound no. 1, Grave no. 2. Plan of the burial (after Matyushchenko & Tataurova 1997: 133, fig. 9). The location of phalerae in the graves are marked in red.



Fig. 2. Phalerae. 1–2 – Volodarka Burial-ground. Burial-mound no. 4/1981. Ural'sk, West-Kazakhstan Regional Museum. Inv. nos. 7949; 4831; 3 – Siberian Collection. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage. Inv. no. S-65; 4 – Ishim. Chance find in a destroyed burial-mound, 1986. Arkaim, Chelyabinsk State Historical-Cultural Preserve 'Arkaim'. Inv. no. M Apk. 222/APX. 90. Drawings (Valentina Mordvintseva).



Fig. 3. Phalerae. 1 – Whereabouts unknown. Novocherkassk, Museum of History of Don Kossaks. Inv. No. 2814; 2 – Sidorovka, Burial-mound no. 1, Grave no. 2. Omsk, Regional Museum of Fine Arts; 3–4 – Novouzensk, chance find in a ploughed burial-mound, 1864. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage. Inv. nos. S-49–50 Drawings (Natalya Bespalyaya).

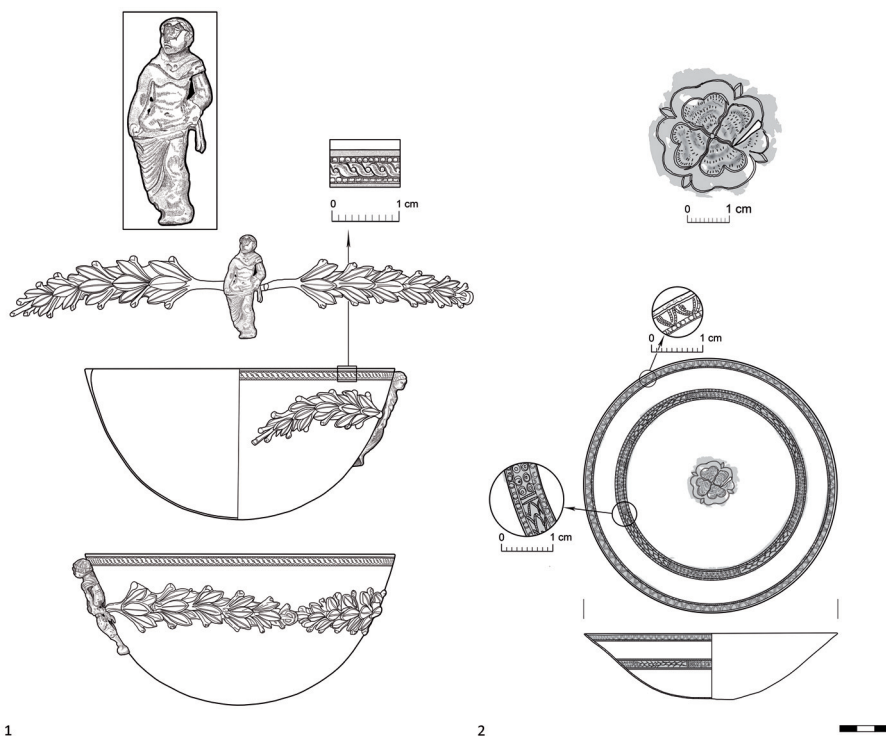


Fig. 4. Silver-gilt bowls. 1 – Verkhnee Pogromnoe Burial-ground. Burial-mound no. 5/1954. Grave no. 2. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage. Inv. no. 1953/29; 2 – Maierovskii III Burial-ground. Burial-mound no. 4/2002. Grave no. 3B. Moscow, State Historical Museum. Inv. no. 112873. List Б 2078/77, no 13. Drawings (Natalya Bepalaya).



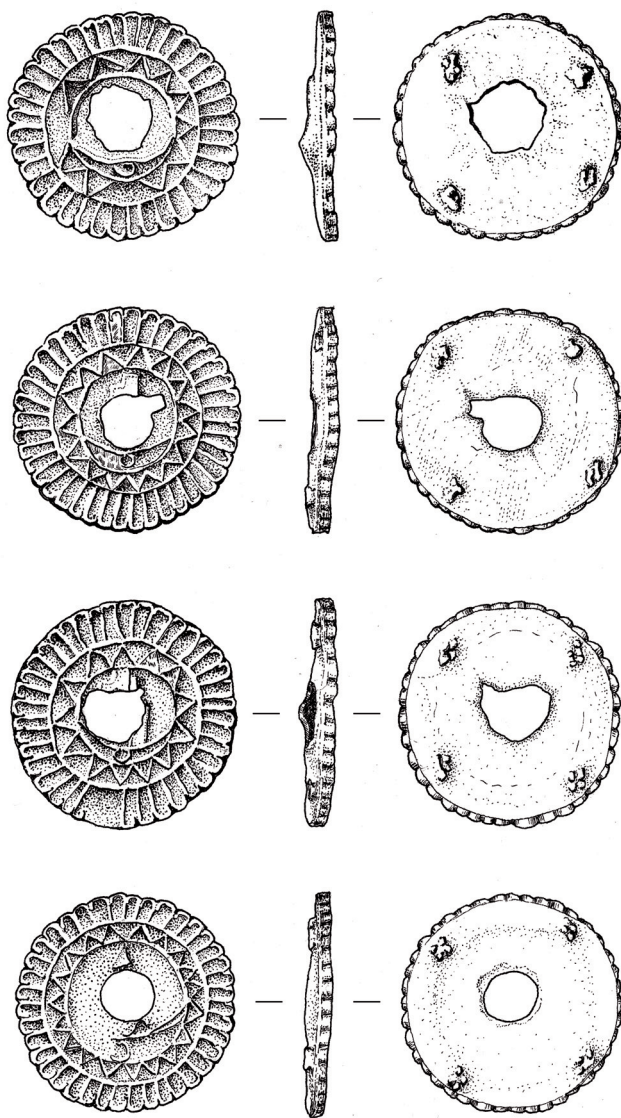


Fig. 5. Gold cloisonné-plaques. Filippovka-I Burial-ground. Burial-mound no. 1/1987. Grave no. 1. Ufa, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography. Inv. Nos. 831/417-420. Drawings (Olga Friesen).