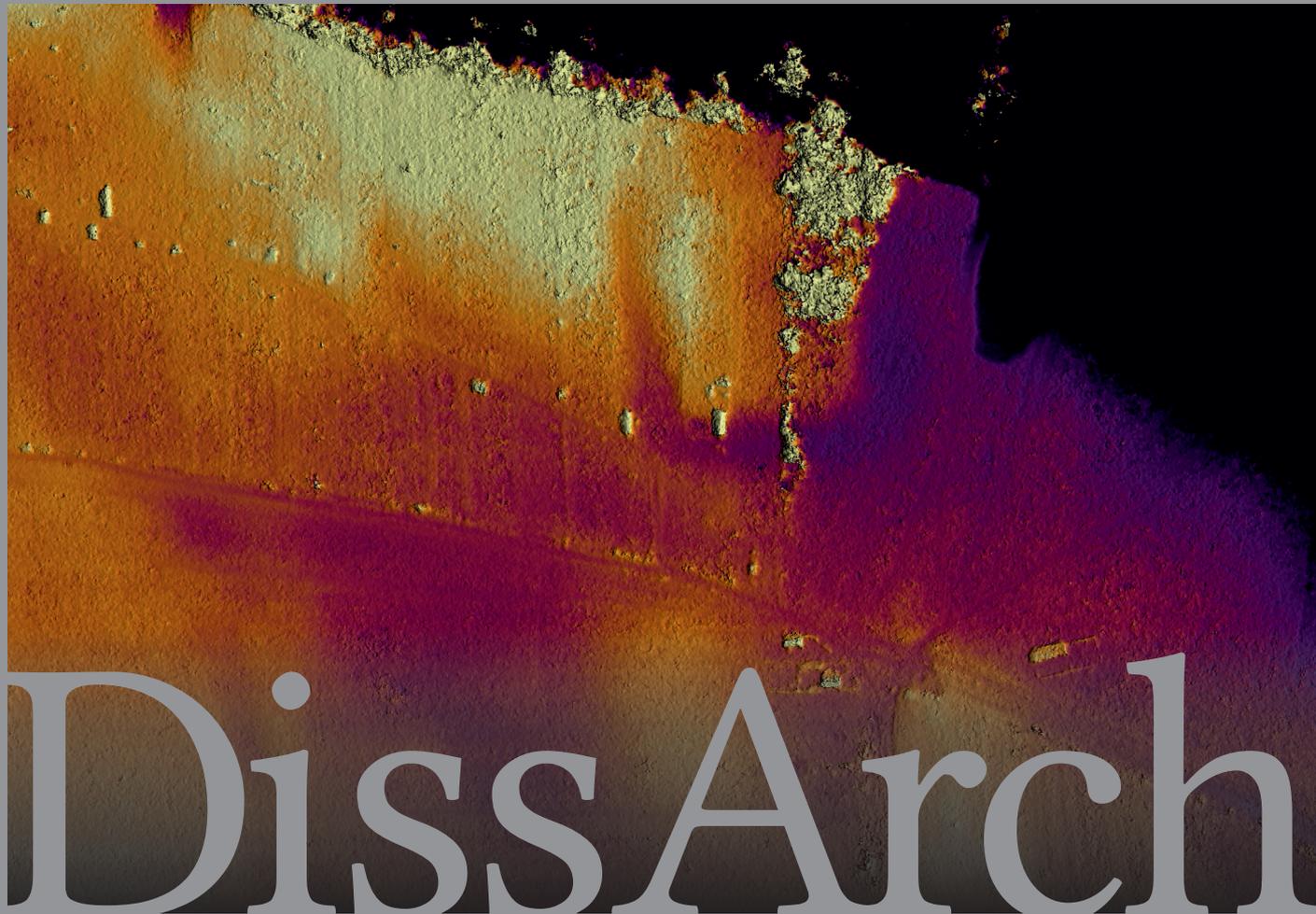


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Recently discovered early medieval grave from Serbin

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Abstract: An early medieval burial was found in Serbin (Krasnodar Krai, Slaviansk-na-Kubani District, Russia) in 2023. The grave contained a battle knife, analogies to which are known not only from Eastern Europe but also Inner Asia and Southern Siberia, emphasizing the vivid connections maintained throughout the Eurasian steppe in the second half of the first millennium AD. Grave 2023/3 of Serbin could be dated to the second half or last third of the 7th century AD.

Keywords: Kuban Region, Early Middle Ages, battle knife, Eurasian nomads

Introduction

The ITC Spetsialnyi Robot Ltd. archaeological team carried out an excavation at Serbin (Krasnodar Krai, Slaviansk-na-Kubani District, Russia) between April and July 2023. The recently excavated area lies next to the part investigated in 2021. This campaign yielded altogether eleven waste pits and four burials, of which only a single grave could be dated to the Early Middle Ages. As a result, five steppe burials are known from the site so far.¹ Serbin is located in the Kuban Region, where several early medieval burials have also been found (Fig. 1).

Grave 2023/3

Shaft grave(?) (Fig. 2). Orientation: ENE–WSW. Depth: 1.21 m (1.25 m from the modern surface). The grave had no soil stain (Fig. 3); thus, its form and dimensions were not discernible. The well-preserved remains of a 40–50-year-old man,² laid extended on his back, were found on the bottom of the grave. The skull was tilted to the left, with the jaw pressed against the left shoulder. The arms were stretched along the body tightly, with the right arm slightly bent at the elbow. The right hand was on the pelvis, while the left one was under it. The legs were parallel, with the knees together. The feet have decayed completely.

1 For the other graves, see SOKOLOV – GULYÁS 2023.

2 The anthropological analysis was carried out by Yelena Gennadievna Zubareva. We are grateful for her help.

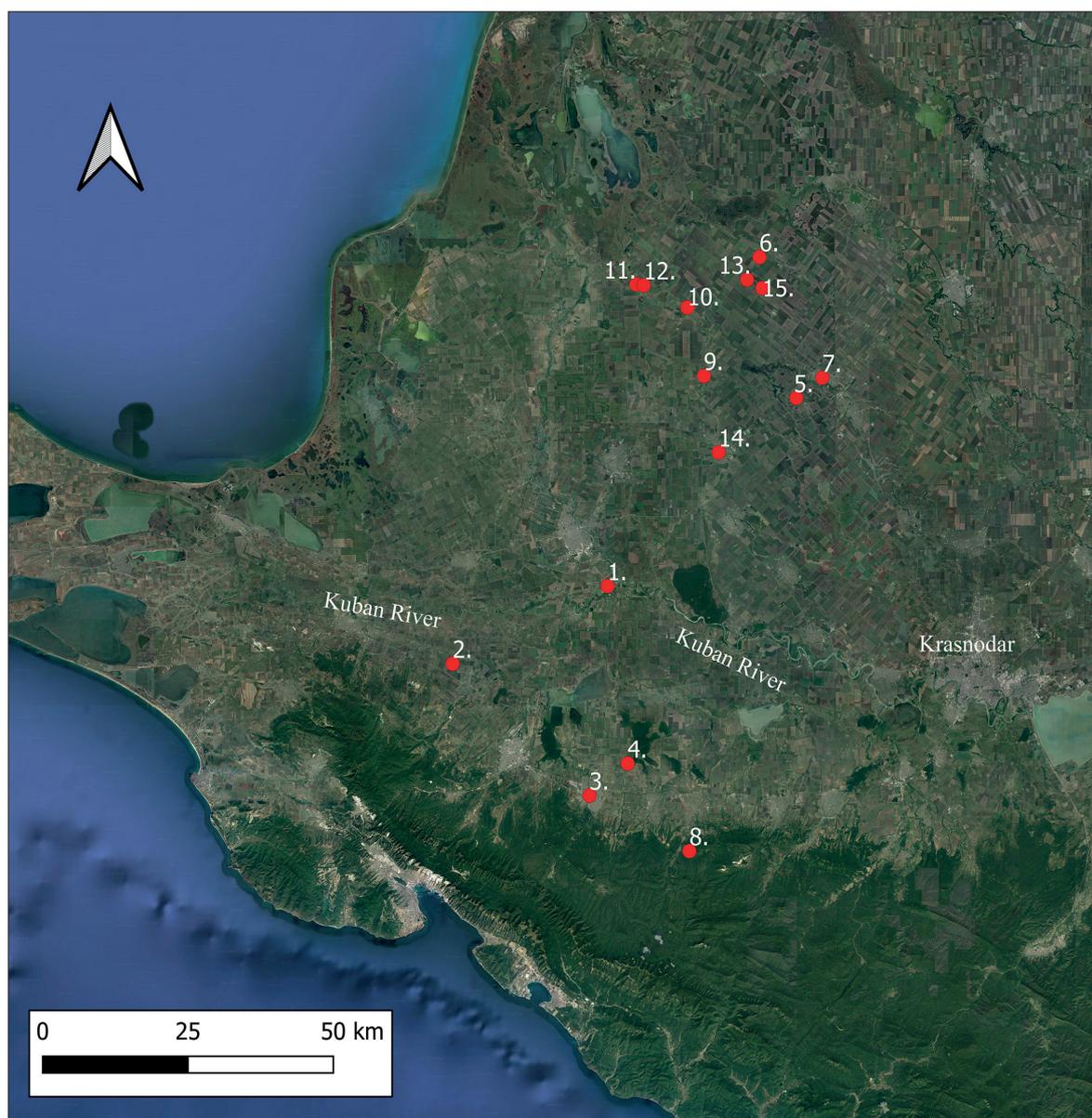


Fig. 1. Early medieval nomadic burials in Kuban region. 1 – Serbin, 2 – Udarnyi, 3 – Abinsk, 4 – Bugundyr, 5 – Chapaevsky, 6 – Greki, 7 – Kalininskaya, 8 – Kholmokoe, 9 – Krupskoy, 10 – Lebedi I, 11 – Lebedi IV, 12 – Lebedi VIII, 13 – Malai, 14 – Staronizhestebievskaya, 15 – Vostochny Malai (after SOKOLOV – GULYÁS 2023)

Catalogue of the finds

1. Skull and extremities of a small ruminant, 27 cm east of the skull. A pair of leg bones was under the animal's skull, while the other pair was north of it at a right angle.

2. Fragments of a single-edged iron knife at the outer side of the left thighbone (Fig. 4.1). The slightly curved blade has a triangular cross-section. The hilt is flat and slightly tapered, with a small rivet hammered to its end and wood remains on the surface. The hilt and blade are joined at an angle with an oval crossguard with a small bulge above it at the blade's root. Only two fragments of the item persisted. Blade: total length ca. 25 cm, length of the survived fragment 15.7 cm, maximum width 2.1 cm, at the crossguard 2.2 cm; hilt: length 3.1 cm, width 0.5–1.9 cm; crossguard: length 6 cm, width: 1.8 cm, thickness: 0.9 cm.

3. Yellow-brown flint piece on the left pelvic bone (Fig. 4.5). Size: 1.8 × 1.4 × 1.4 × 1.2 cm.

4. Fragment of an iron sheet on the left pelvic bone, between the piece of flint and the iron knife (Fig. 4.4). Size: 1.85 × 1.4 × 0.2 cm.

5. Fragmentary iron object with rounded corners and a rivet by the edge on the lumbar vertebrae at the pelvis (Fig. 4.3). Size: 1.5 × 1.5 × 1.1 cm.

6. Rectangular iron buckle at the right hand (Fig. 4.2). The frame and the pin have round profiles; the pin extends over the frame. Frame size: 3.3 × 2.75 cm; pin diameter: 0.4 cm.

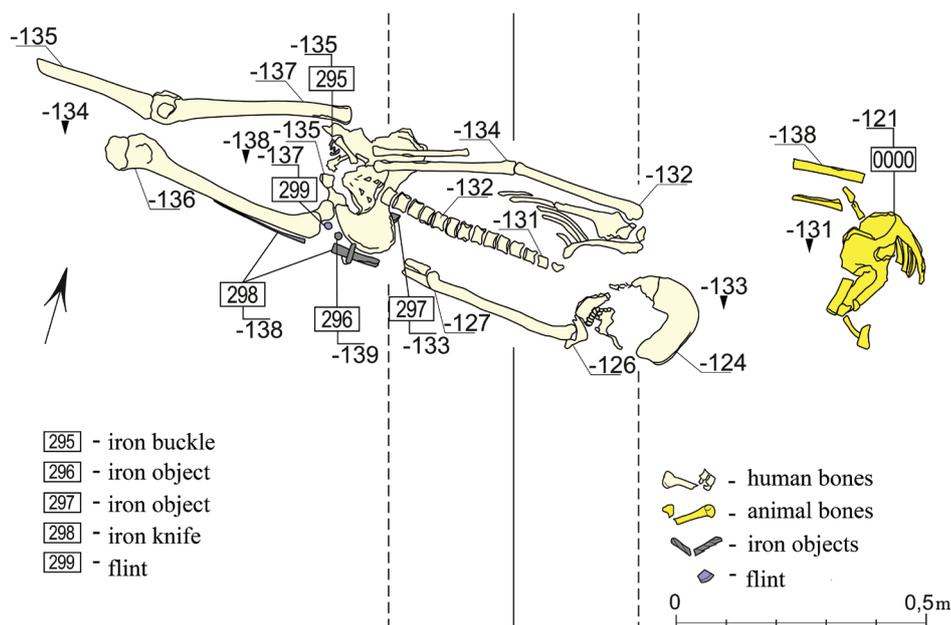


Fig. 2. Survey map of the grave

Burial rite

Orientation

The deceased was oriented E–W. This orientation was common amongst Eastern European nomads in the 6th–7th centuries AD. All previously excavated graves from Serbin had ENE–WSW orientation, i.e., practically identical to the recently discovered one.³ In the Kuban Region, Grave 2 of Mound 29 at Chapaevsky, Grave 5 of Mound 4 at Krupskoy, Grave 16 of Mound 4 and Grave 19 of Mound 5 at Lebedi, and Grave 2 of Mound 2 at Lebedi IV had similar orientations.⁴

Grave pit type

The form of the grave pit could not be determined during excavation. However, the position of the animal remains and other graves on the site indicate that it was a simple shaft grave. This was the most common grave type in the steppe region; such grave pits sometimes had a shoulder along one or both sidewalls.⁵

Animal remains

The remains of a flayed sheep or goat were found east of the skull. Based on the position of the animal skull and the leg bones, the skin had been folded before it was put into the grave. This funerary custom is known from the steppe in the Hun Period. The sheep remains were found behind

3 SOKOLOV – GULYÁS 2023, 35.

4 ATAVIN 1996, 230; CHKHAI DZE 2010, 51, 54; SKARBOVENKO – LIFANOV 2012, 25.

5 The shoulders along the sidewalls of the grave were often not observed in early excavations, but the occasional horse remains above the human skeleton may indicate their existence, like, e.g. in Grave 1 of Mound 3 at Sheliuhi (KOMAR 2008, 94).



Fig. 3. Photo of the grave

the feet of the deceased in Grave 2 at Shipovo in the wider region of the Ural River.⁶ Similar burials appeared in the Kuban Region from the second half of the 6th century AD onwards. Folded skins of small ruminants placed behind the skull are known from Grave 2 of Mound 29 at Chapaevsky, Grave 6 of Mound 1 at Greki I, and Grave 2021/14 at Serbin.⁷

The find material

Iron buckle

A rectangular iron buckle was found on the pelvis of the deceased. Such belt buckles are relatively common in steppe burials in the examined period, albeit most are shorter and broader. Similar items may be mentioned from Grave 16 of Mound 4 at Lebedi I, Mound 6 at Lebedi IV, and Grave 1 of Mound 8 at Staronizhesteblievsky.⁸ Based on its proportion, the buckle found in Grave 3 of Mound 5 at Zaplavka III in the Middle Dnieper Region is the closest analogy to the Serbin piece, but this one was fastened to the leather strap with two folded brass sheets.⁹

Flint

The piece of flint in the grave was not the only such item on the site; similar pieces were found in Grave 2021/5 and Grave 2021/12.¹⁰ It is striking that although the burial contained the remains of two iron objects, based on their shape, none of them could be a fire iron. While flints are common additions to steppe burials, fire irons are missing from a significant part. The only similar burial in the wider region of Serbin is Grave 6 at Lebedi IV.¹¹

6 MINAEVA 1929, 195.

7 ATAVIN 1996, 241, Tab. 4.1; CHKHAIDZE 2011, 116; SOKOLOV – GULYÁS 2023, 42.

8 CHKHAIDZE 2010, 52, Ris. 1.3; SKARBOVENKO – LIFANOV 2012, 44, Ris. 10.3; ATAVIN 1996, 263, Tab. 26.3.

9 SHALOBUDOV 1983, 67, Ris. 6.

10 SOKOLOV – GULYÁS 2023, 45.

11 SKARBOVENKO – LIFANOV 2012, 29.

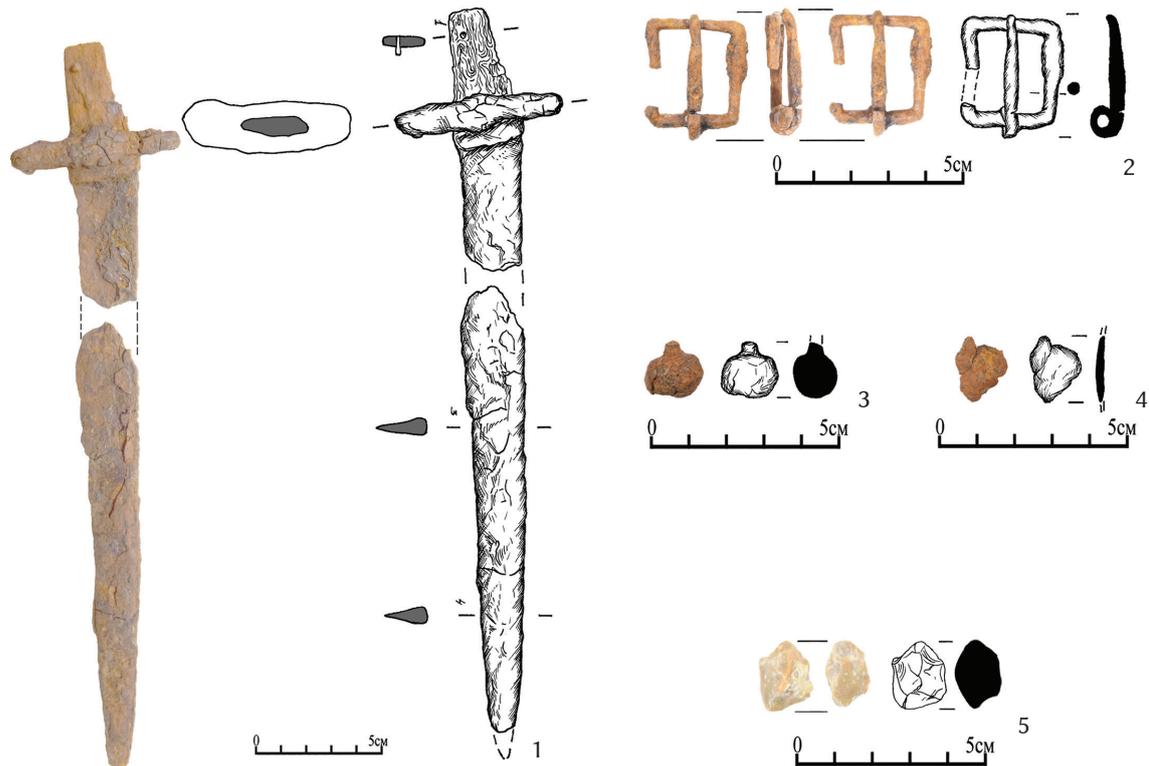


Fig. 4. Finds from the grave

Battle knife

The most remarkable find of the assemblage is the single-edged battle knife with a blade and hilt joined at an angle. The oval or rhomboid crossguard is also a recurring element of this weapon type.¹² Its closest analogy in the Eastern European steppe is known from Grave 2 of Mound 1 at Shilovka in the Volga Region (Fig. 5.1).¹³ As the catacomb grave contained the scattered remains of a young adult and two children, the finds could not be linked with a specific person.¹⁴ The perforated *solidus* of Heraclius and Heraclius Constans (minted in 625–629 AD) gives a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the catacomb.¹⁵ Oleksy Komar classified the burial to Period IVa, which he dated between 698 and 715 AD.¹⁶ Although this dating seems a bit late at first, one can assume, based on the wear marks on the coin, that it was likely not placed in the grave immediately after issuance. The rare or unique object types of the grave find assemblage, like the belt fittings with glass inlay and the gold earring with an amethyst bead pendant, cannot help specify the dating of the feature. However, the earring with the mobile bead pendant cannot be earlier than the last third of the 7th century AD, either in Eastern Europe or the Carpathian Basin.¹⁷

12 The terminology is not clear. Anatoly Ambroz refers to them as a dagger (*kindzhal*; AMBROZ 1986, 59), and this name also appears later in the work of Gleb Kubarev (KUBAREV 2017, 148–149). On the other hand, Oleksy Komar—in our opinion, correctly—emphasized that one should instead interpret the object as a cutting weapon, i.e. a knife (KOMAR 2001, 25).

13 BAGAUTDINOV et al. 1998, 219, Tab. 8.1.

14 BAGAUTDINOV et al. 1998, 183–189. Since the Shilovka catacomb, unlike the Caucasian and the Crimean ones, was made of earth, one may discard the possibility that a long time passed between the burial of the individuals.

15 SOMOGYI 2009, 213.

16 KOMAR 2006, 123–124.

17 SOMOGYI 2009, 214.

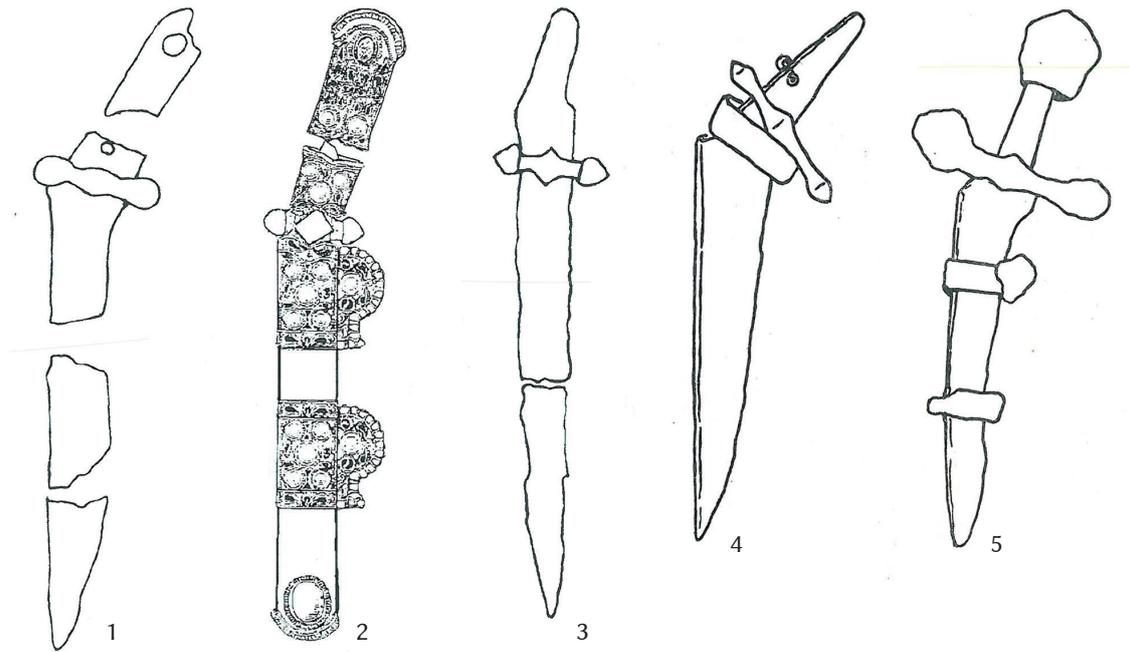


Fig. 5. Analogies to the battle knife. 1 – Shilovka, 2 – Hlodosy, 3 – Borisovo, 4 – Uibatsky chaatas, 5 – Arkhiereiskaya Zaimka. Different scales (1, 3 – after KOMAR 2006, 2 – after KOMAR 2001, 4–5 – after YEVTIUKHOVA 1952)

A knife with a similar shape was found in Hlodosy in the Middle Dnieper Region (Fig. 5.2).¹⁸ Recent research has identified the gold sheath fittings with semiprecious stone inlays, also discovered there, as part of this weapon.¹⁹ The assemblage was interpreted as a deposit first, despite the original publication mentioning small bone fragments around the finds.²⁰ Based on that, Aleksandr Semenov interpreted the Hlodosy finds as a lavish cremation burial.²¹ Anatoly Ambroz dated the assemblage to the second half of the 7th century AD.²²

The sacrificial site near Voznesenka, also in the Middle Dnieper Region, also contained a similar knife.²³ The interpretation of the site was subject to debate for a long time until Anatoly Ambroz finally connected the rectangular ditch with the Old Turkic sacrificial places in Mongolia.²⁴ Nikolay Khrissimov pointed out that the finds were collected over a long period in the 7th–8th centuries AD so that they can be classified into several chronological horizons. Unfortunately, he did not specify the dating of the battle knife found there.²⁵

Another specimen was found as a stray find in Topoli in Oskil Valley in 1891. It was accompanied by a chain, a sickle, a spearhead, arrowheads, an axe, a sabre, a horse bit, and some clothing accessories, including buckles and brooches.²⁶ As L. A. Yevtiukhova pointed out, the item's proportions differ from the other pieces.²⁷ The find assemblage resembles the average grave inventory in the

18 SMILENKO 1965, 24, Ris. 19.7,12. The author interpreted the object as the hilt of a sabre.

19 For the reconstruction, see KOMAR 2006, 44, Ris. 10.

20 SMILENKO 1965.

21 SEMENOV 1988, 100–101.

22 AMBROZ 1986, 59.

23 SEMENOV 1988, 105.

24 AMBROZ 1982.

25 KHRISIMOV 2009, 10–31.

26 OAK 1893, 128.

27 YEVTIUKHOVA 1952, 113.

cemeteries of the Saltovo Culture,²⁸ assigning the feature to which would mean that the Topoli knife is much younger than the one from Serbin.

Two similar battle knives are known from Eastern Europe from a non-steppe context. One was discovered in Grave 138 at Borisovo in the northeastern coastal zone of the Black Sea (Fig. 5.3). The cist had NE–SW orientation; it contained, besides the knife, cremains and a Syracuse-type buckle.²⁹ Vsevolod Sakhanev distinguished three phases of the site, of which he assigned Grave 138 to Phase 2 when both inhumation and cremation burial were practised there. Based on the variety of the burial rites and the find material, Igor Gavritukhin and Aleksei Piankov considered Borisovo a political-military centre.³⁰ Syracuse-type buckles are amongst the most common buckles of Byzantine origin, with many analogies in the Mediterranean.³¹ Mechthild Schulze-Dörrlamm dated the type between the end of the 6th and the third quarter of the 7th century AD.³² As this buckle type was probably longer in use in the northern Pontic Region, some specimens may be dated to the end of the 7th century AD.³³

Finally, the battle knife found in Catacomb 2 of the cemetery of Direktorskaya Gorka in the north Caucasus can be mentioned.³⁴ Maia Abramova dated the site to the second half of the 7th and early 8th centuries AD. She emphasized the particular burial rite (the catacombs contained cremated remains) and linked it with Inner Asian Turkic tribes.³⁵

According to Aleksandr Semenov, this battle knife type originates from Inner Asia.³⁶ Earlier research reached a similar conclusion, originating the type from the East, but based on Turkic sculptures in Inner Asia and wall paintings in Central Asia instead of excavation results.³⁷ Oleksy Komar used a similar argument and accepted the eastern origin of these knives, although he emphasized that such items are scarce in Old Turkic graves.³⁸

Such knives are called Uibat-type, after the first specimen from Inner Asia.³⁹ Recently, Gleb Kubarev collected the known specimens.⁴⁰ He mentions three sites from the Altai Mountains (Katanda, Yakonur, and Kok-Edigan), the cemetery of Aimyrlyg from Tuva, Uibatsky Chaatas from the Minusinsk Basin (Fig. 5.4), and Saratovka from the Kuznetsk Basin. A specimen was also found in Arkhiereiskaya Zaimka (Fig. 5.5) and another in Chingis in the Middle Ob Valley.⁴¹ He linked this knife type with various nomadic tribes, primarily the Turks, based on a large number of Inner Asian sculptures. However, based on the stylistic analysis of the depictions, we can count on their appearance from the second half of the 5th century AD, i.e. long before the Turkic Khaganate was established.⁴²

28 For example, in Sukhaya Gomolsha (AKSENOV – MIHEEV 2006).

29 SAKHANEV 1912, 120.

30 GAVRITUKHIN – PIANKOV 2003, 195.

31 Cf. SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 2002, 176, Abb. 62.

32 SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 2002, 179.

33 KHAIREDIKOVA 2016, 251.

34 ABRAMOVA 1982, 141, Ris. 5.23.

35 ABRAMOVA 1982, 148.

36 SEMENOV 1988, 105.

37 AMBROZ 1986, 61.

38 KOMAR 2001, 25.

39 BAGAUDTINOV et al. 1998, 113; YEVTIUKHOVA 1952, 112–113.

40 He listed knives with a similar shape but without a crossguard.

41 KUBAREV 2017, 148.

42 KUBAREV 2017, 148–149.

Summary

Based on funerary rite, Grave 3 of Serbin fits well amongst the burials excavated on the site earlier. The burial is poorly equipped, but for a battle knife, which represents a type which is very rare in the archaeological record of the steppe. This item links the burial not only with the 7th-century AD steppe elite of Eastern Europe (Voznesenka and Hlodosy) but also with the nomadic heritage of Inner Asia and Southern Siberia (see Fig. 6). In the last two decades, Ukrainian and Russian research has been paying more and more attention to the Central and Inner Asian connections of the archaeological material of the Eastern European steppe. Anna Mastykova considered the mirrors with handles, a specific type of horse harness with semiprecious stone or glass inlays, the so-called ‘tiered arrowheads’ (complex tanged trilobate arrowheads with a triangular point, concave neck, wide, high, curved shoulder and conical bottom), and the P-shaped suspension loops in the post-Hun record a Central Asian heritage.⁴³ Oleksy Komar reconstructed a new nomadic wave from Inner Asia during the 7th century AD, listing eleven burial rites and object types as proofs.⁴⁴ In our opinion, the broad distribution of these objects cannot be explained automatically with migrations, but the role of the spread of certain innovations across Eurasia should not be underestimated either, as displayed by the example of the battle knife of Serbin.⁴⁵

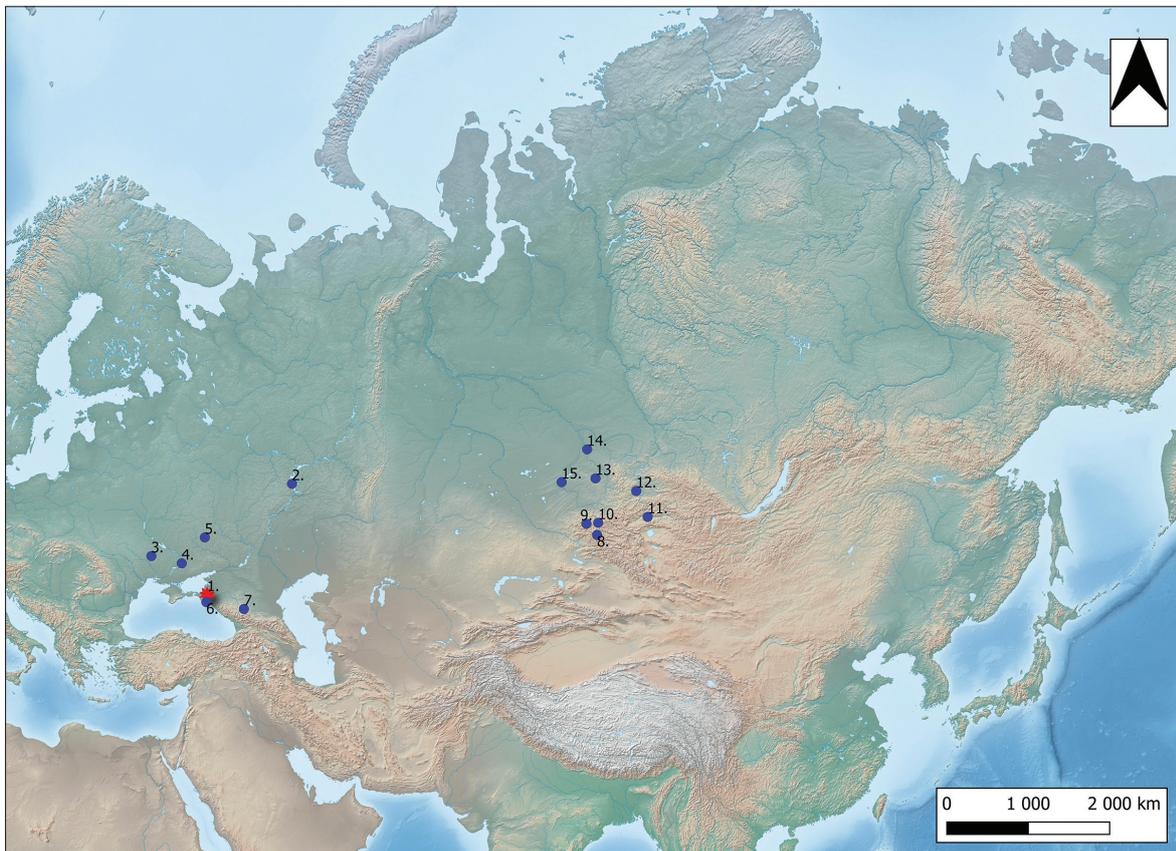


Fig. 6. Distribution of the Uibat-type knives. 1 – Serbin, 2 – Shilovka, 3 – Hlodosy, 4 – Voznesenka, 5 – Topoli, 6 – Borisovo, 7 – Direktorskaya Gorka, 8 – Katanda, 9 – Yakonur, 10 – Kok-Edigan, 11 – Aimyrlyg, 12 – Uibat, 13 – Saratovka, 14 – Arkhiereiskaya Zaimka, 15 – Chingis

43 MASTYKOVA 2018.

44 KOMAR et al. 2006, 365–366.

45 The paper was written as part of the project TKP2021-NKTA-24.

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