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Scythian dagger from the Museum of Orheiul Vechi Reserve*

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The paper analyses a Scythian iron dagger of the Mircești type preserved in the Orheiul Vechi Cultural-Natural Reserve Museum. Donated anonymously in 2021 and most likely originating from the right bank of the Dniester River, the artefact represents a rare example of Scythian weaponry from a region where such finds are uncommon and usually lack archaeological context. The dagger is well preserved and displays a diamond-section blade, a semicircular “*pelte*-shaped” hilt, and an ornithomorphic antenna-like pommel, allowing its secure attribution to the Mircești type, closely related to the Găiceana one. Comparative analysis demonstrates that while such daggers are frequently found in burial contexts within the Black Sea steppe and the North Caucasus, their presence west of the Dniester and Danube is largely limited to stray finds. Chronologically, Mircești-type daggers date from the late 6th to the first half of the 5th century BC, with a concentration in the early 5th century BC. The Orheiul Vechi specimen fits well within this horizon and highlights the Carpathian-Dniester region as a key contact zone between the Scythian steppe and Central Europe.

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Pumnalul scitic din Muzeul Rezervației Orheiul Vechi

Articolul analizează un pumnal scitic din fier, de tip Mircești, păstrat în Muzeul Rezervației Cultural-Naturale Orheiul Vechi. Donat anonim în anul 2021 și provenind, cel mai probabil, de pe malul drept al râului Nistru, artefactul reprezintă un exemplu rar de armament scitic într-o regiune unde asemenea descoperiri sunt puține și, de regulă, lipsite de context arheologic sigur. Pumnalul este bine conservat și prezintă o lamă cu secțiune romboidală, o gardă semicirculară de tip „*peltă*” și un buton terminal cu antene ornitoforme, trăsături care permit atribuirea sa sigură tipului Mircești, strâns înrudit cu grupul Găiceana. Analiza comparativă arată că, în timp ce astfel de pumnale apar frecvent în contexte funerare din stepa nord-pontică și din Caucazul de Nord, la vest de Nistru și Dunăre ele sunt cunoscute în principal ca descoperiri întâmplătoare. Din punct de vedere cronologic, pumnalele de tip Mircești sunt datate între sfârșitul secolului al VI-lea și prima jumătate a secolului al V-lea î.Chr., cu o concentrare în prima parte a secolului al V-lea î.Chr. Exemplarul de la Orheiul Vechi se încadrează pe deplin în acest orizont și evidențiază regiunea carpato-nistreană ca o importantă zonă de contact între stepa scitică și Europa Centrală.

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Introduction

Despite increased interest in the distribution and typology of Scythian weaponry in the Black Sea and Carpathian-Danube regions, key questions remain about the presence and chronological spread of Mircești-type daggers in central Moldova, particularly on the right bank of the Dniester River. This paper addresses a notable gap in current scholarship concerning the provenance and diffusion of Scythian objects in this area, a region where such finds are rare and their archaeological context often uncertain. In 2021, the

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Orheiul Vechi Cultural-Natural Reserve received an anonymously donated Scythian-type iron dagger from a resident of the Butuceni village. The artefact was incorporated into the museum's collection following the renovation of the Early Iron Age display cases. Due to its passage through several owners, the circumstances of its discovery are unclear. It was most likely found in central Moldova, on the right bank of the Dniester River.

The dagger is well preserved, allowing for a precise assessment of its morphology, particu-

larly after restoration and conservation by Valeriu Bubulici at the National Museum of History of Moldova. It measures 40.4 cm in total length, with a diamond-shaped blade of 29.1 cm, a maximum width of 3.2 cm, and a thickness of 0.6 cm. The handle comprises a welded two-part pommel and hilt, with the handle approximately 5 cm thick. The hilt is

straight at the top with small notches near the handle, and semicircular at the bottom where it meets the blade, measuring 4.1 cm wide, 1.4 cm high, and 0.9 cm thick. The pommel is straight, slightly curved at the edges, and features small notches at the bottom near the handle, measuring 4.8 cm wide, 1.5 cm high, and 0.8 cm thick (fig. 1; 2).

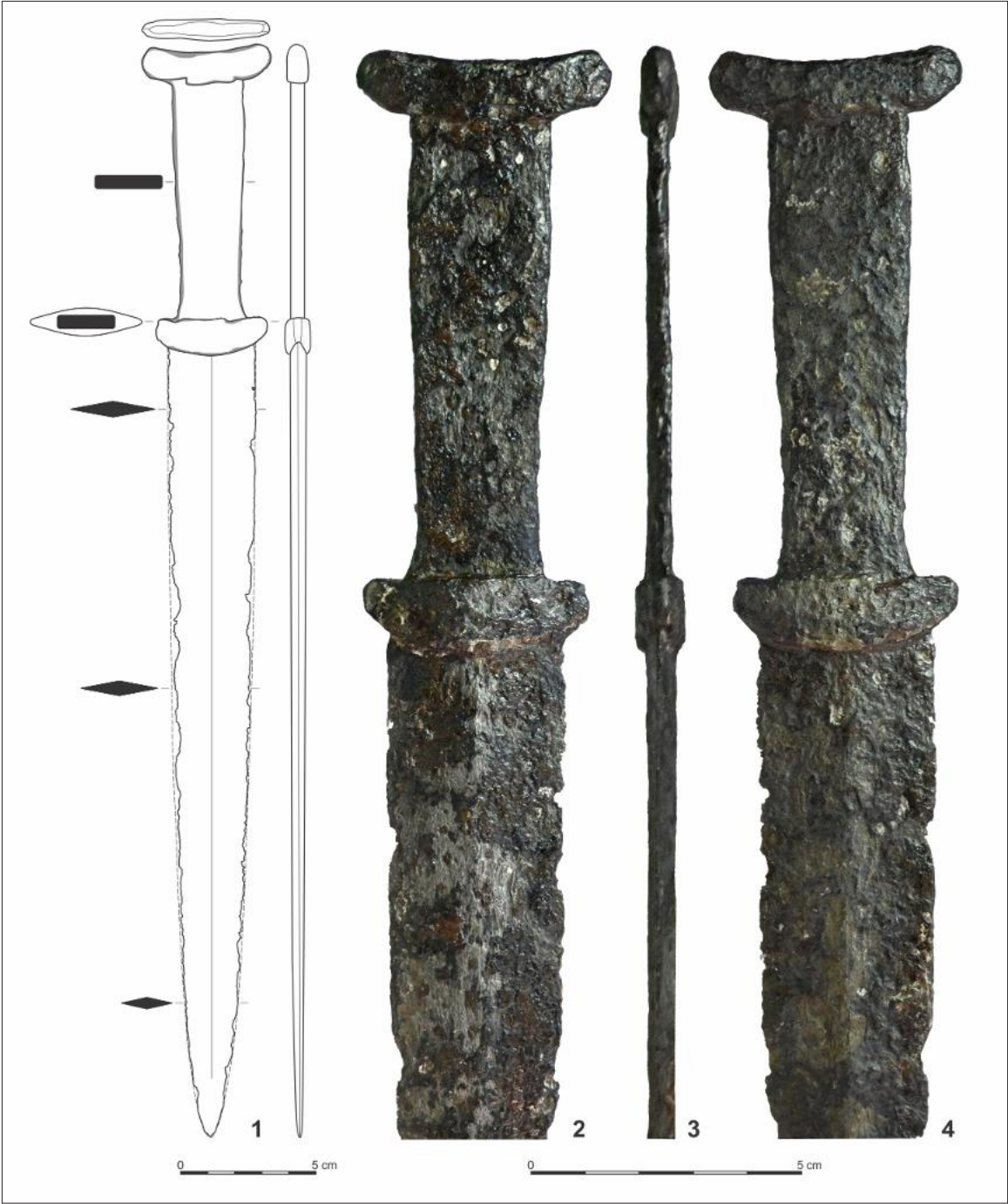


Fig. 1. *Akinakes* from Butuceni: technical drawing (1) and details of the handle (2-4).



Fig. 2. *Akinakes* from Butuceni after restoration, details of the pommel (a, c) and hilt (b, d).

The design and morphology of the dagger align with the Mircești type [Topal 2022, 54], which is related to the Găiceana type as defined by A. Vulpe [1990, 57-58]; both types feature a pommel shaped as ornithomorphic antennae. With few exceptions, the Găiceana and Mircești types are characterised by a distinctive semicircular hilt resembling a “Thracian shield” or “πέλτη”. The limited number of *akinakai* with semicircular

hilts in the 1950s prevented A.I. Meliukova [1964, 55] from establishing a definitive chronology. Later research dated this hilt type to the 6th-5th centuries BC [Fodor 1969, 253] or specifically to the 5th century BC [Evdokimov, Murzin 1984, 78]. A comprehensive study of 55 swords and daggers with segmented crossguards by Ukrainian scholars placed these artifacts in the “second half of the 6th – first half of the 5th century BC”

[Babenko, Shelekhan' 2015, 83, 88]. Burial finds of Mircești-type *akinakai* with *pelte*-hilts are typical of the Black Sea steppe and Crimea [Babenko, Shelekhan' 2015, 79-83], while stray finds are mainly from the forest-steppe of the Donets-Bug interfluvium and the Eastern Carpathians (fig. 3) [Babenko, Shelekhan' 2015, 84-86].

Distribution of the Mircești type

In addition, *akinakai* of the Mircești type are also well known in the west of the "Scythian world" (fig. 3; 4): in Dobruja, among the materials of the Celic-dere burial ground [Simion 2000, fig. 9, 1; Simion 2005, fig. 7; Sirbu *et al.* 2013, fig. 10a; Sirbu 2015, ryc. 6, 1] and a stray find near the village of Murighiol [Bujor 1955, pl. 2: 14; Vulpe 1990, Taf. 17: 80]. In the Carpathian-Dniester region they are mainly represented by chance finds: from Mircești, Dănești and Petricani in Romania [Vulpe 1990, Taf. 2, 9, 10; 15, 76], as well as the Telenești District and Lărguța in Moldova [Topal 2019, fig. 8, 23, 24]. Moreover, two *akinakai* of the Mircești type were found in burials from the second half of the 6th – first half of the 5th century BC near the village of Cozia [Vulpe 1990, Taf. 11, 56; Iconomu 2010, fig. 1c, 2c] in eastern Romania. The burial between the villages of Tudora and Palanca on the Lower Dniester is also dated within the first half of the 5th century BC [Bruiaș 2005, 163-164; Topal 2021, 401]. Finds from Serbia, Hungary, Transylvania, and the Czech Republic are purely stray – from Horákovský hrad [Topal, Golec 2017, fig. 1, 1], Ardanovo [Hampel 1876, 23, fig. 7], Vršac [Milleker 1898, Abb. 1], Tiszabercel [Nagy 1915, Abb. 1, 1], Veszprém [Kemenczei 1984, Abb. 2: 2] and Násal [Roska 1937, Abb. 5].

This pattern reveals that, within the western regions, Mircești-type daggers typically occur as isolated or chance finds rather than in organised burial contexts, except a few instances in eastern Romania and the lower Dniester. Their sporadic and scattered presence in Central and Southeastern Europe, often beyond the borders of the core Scythian steppe, points toward the movement of objects and individuals across cultural boundaries and highlights the role of the Carpathian-Danube zone as a transitional area between the steppes and neighbouring regions.

Most of these items are confidently associated with the Black Sea region (fig. 3; 5), primarily

with its forest-steppe region. The interpretive value of stray finds – those discovered outside of clear archaeological contexts – lies in their potential to illuminate patterns of mobility, exchange, and cultural interaction. Unlike objects from well-excavated burial complexes, stray finds may reflect trade routes, the movement of individuals or groups, or even the deposition of martial objects as part of rituals in liminal or contested spaces. Highlighting these discoveries thus broadens our understanding of how Scythian material culture spread beyond core settlement areas and may indicate the permeability of cultural boundaries during the early Iron Age. The *akinakes* in the Lviv Museum collection may have originated from the Podolia or Bug region [Kosikov, Pavlik 1992, Fig. 1, 1]. An abundance of stray finds were discovered in the territory of the Right-bank Dnieper forest-steppe, among numerous locations: Pastyske [Drevnosti Pridneprov'ia 1899, pl. 2, 53; 3, 52; Didenko, Shelekhan' 2016, fig. 1, 4, 8; 2, 1], Kamyanka-Tarapun [Liashko 2019, fig. 3], Vitove [Poltavets' 2003, fig. 3, 5], Velykyi Bukryn, Tahancha, Hryshchyntsi [Didenko, Shelekhan' 2016, fig. 1, 7; 2, 4, 6], Kaniv District [Drevnosti Pridneprov'ia 1900, pl. 3, 51] and Kozarovichy [Petrovskaia 1971, fig. 1, 1]. Stray finds of Mircești type daggers are also found on the Left Bank of the Dnieper River, up to the Seim and the Donets: near the village of Viry [Bilins'kii 2011, Fig. 1, 1], presumably from Kharkiv [Babenko, Shelekhan' 2015, Fig. 1, 2], Kuzemin [Berest *et al.* 2018, Fig. 1, 2], Malinovka [Sarapulskina 2005, Fig. 1, 1] and the Kuzina Gora hillfort [Voronina 1962, Fig. 1, 4]. The easternmost finds of Mircești-type *akinakai* are also associated with the forest-steppe zone, in particular, with the interfluvium of the Middle Don and Khopyor rivers, including stray finds near Peskovatka [Voroshilov 2007, Fig. 110] and Novokhopors'k [Merkulov 2014, Fig. 1]. The only specimen associated with a burial was discovered in a barrow near the village of Vovkivtsi, excavated by S.A. Mazaraki [Drevnosti Pridneprov'ia 1899, pl. 2, 56]; however, nothing is known about its composition.

In the steppe Black Sea region, there are far fewer such finds. Still, they are better represented by burial complexes (fig. 5). Among them: burial 1 of mound 52 near the village of Vyshchetasivka [Murzin 1984, Fig. 13, 2], a ground burial of the cemetery on Dubovyi Island [Ostapenko 2007,



Fig. 3. Distribution of the Middle Scythian *akinaikai* (A – Găiceana type, B – Marychevka type, C – Mircești type, and D – Issyk type; ceremonial items are marked with a star), according to Topal 2024 with additions: 1 – Horákovský hrad; 2 – Veszprém; 3 – Vršac; 4 – Tiszabercel; 5 – Ardanovo; 6 – Näsäl; 7 – Lviv Museum; 8 – Petricani; 9 – Dănești; 10 – Mircești; 11 – Cozia; 12 – Telenești District; 13 – Butuceni; 14 – Lărguța; 15 – Celic-dere (Telița); 16 – Murighiol; 17 – Tudora-Palanca; 18 – Ivanivka; 19 – Pastyrsk; 20 – Kamyanka (Tarapun); 21 – Vitove; 22 – Velykyi Bukryn; 23 – Hryshchyntsi; 24 – Kaniv; 25 – Tahancha; 26 – Kozarovychi; 27 – Vovkivtsi; 28 – Kuzemin; 29 – Viry; 30 – Kuzina Gora; 31 – Malinovka; 32 – Peskovatka; 33 – Novokhoporsky; 34 – Krasnoe; 35 – Nenasytets; 36 – Vovnig; 37 – Dubovy Island; 38 – Vyshchetasivka; 39 – Krylovka; 40 – Kubalach; 41 – Nymphaeum; 42 – Rassvet; 43 – Gai-Kodzor; 44 – Starokorsunskaya; 45 – Pashkovskoye-6.

Fig. 9, 2]. Stray finds are represented by specimens from Krasnoe [Dubovskaia, Podobed 1993, Fig. 56, 2], Nenasytets [Babenko, Shelekan' 2015, Fig. 1, 3], Ivanivka [Boltrik 2014, Fig. 6, 2] and the

settlement of Vovnigi [Mogilov 2018, Fig. 12]. A burial from a mound burial near Vyshchetasivka was dated to the middle of the 5th century BC, according to the quiver set consisting of ar-

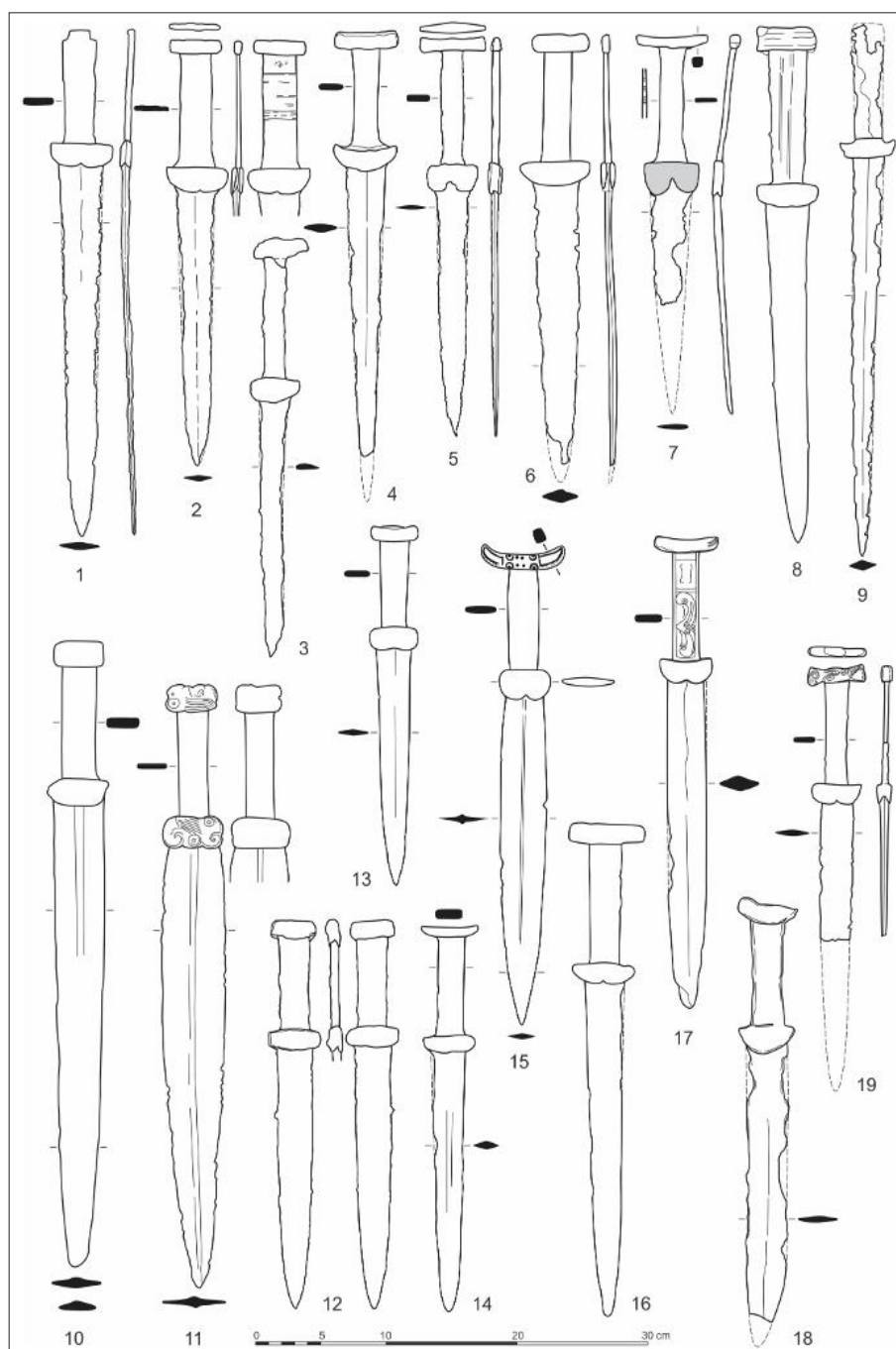


Fig. 4. *Akinakai* of the Mircești type in the Danube region: 1 – Mircești, stray find; 2 – Dănești, stray find; 3, 18 – Cozia (3 – stray find; 18 – Voloaca Mică, stray find); 4 – Ardanovo, stray find; 5 – Vrșac, stray find; 6 – Lviv Museum; 7 – Tiszabercel, stray find; 8 – Lărguța, stray find; 9 – Năsal, stray find; 10, 14, 16, 17 – Celic-dere (10 – mound 44, burial 1; 14, 16, 17 – burial); 11 – Veszprém, stray find; 12 – Telenești District, stray find; 13 – Horákovský hrad, stray find; 15 – Tudora-Palanca, burial; 19 – Petricani, stray find (1-6, 8-19 – iron; 7 – bronze, iron).

rowheads with the internal sleeve [Murzin 1984, 25]. The burial site on Dubovyi Island, also judging by the arrowheads, is dated to no later than the early 5th century BC [Ostapenko 2007, 148]. Two burials are known in Crimea: ground burial G8 of

the Nymphaeum necropolis [Grach 1999, fig. 44; table 143, 5] and burial 3 of burial mound 20 near the village of Krylovka [Kolotukhin 2000, fig. 19, 21]. They are supplemented by a find from Mountainous Crimea, on Mount Kubalach [Skoryi,

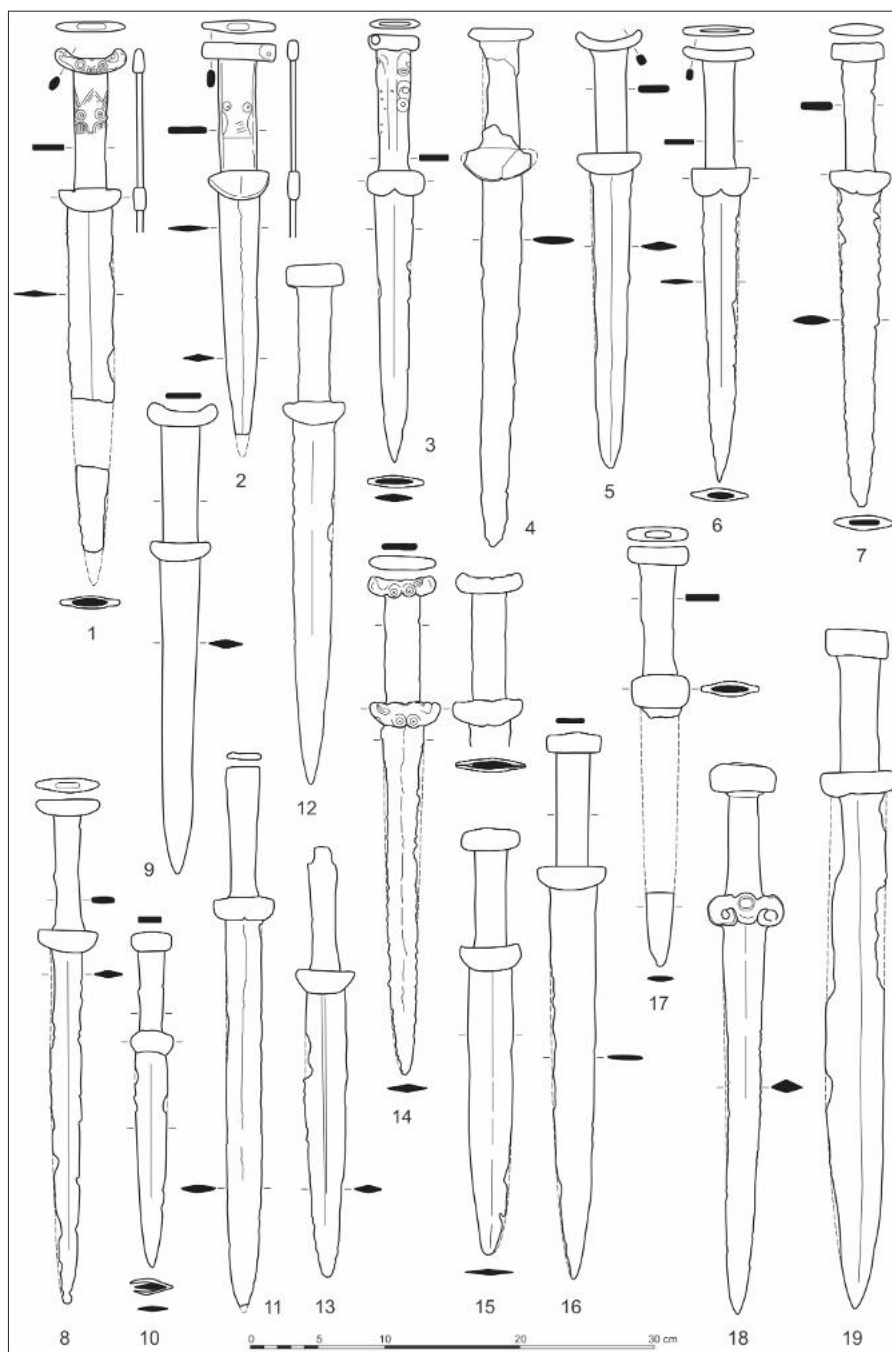


Fig. 5. *Akinakai* of the Mircești type in the Black Sea region (1-10, 12, 15, 17-19), Volga-Don region (13, 14) and Caucasus (11, 16): 1 – Vovkivtsi, barrow; 2 – Tahancha, stray find; 3, 10 – Pastyrskoe, stray find; 4 – Vitove, stray find; 5 – Nenasytets, stray find; 6 – Hryshchyntsi, stray find; 7 – Viry, stray find; 8 – Kharkiv Museum; 11 – Pashkovskoe-6 hilfort; 12 – Kamyanka-Tarapun, stray find; 13 – Kuzina Gora hilfort; 14 – Peskovatka, stray find; 15 – Kyiv Museum; 16 – Gai-Kodzor, stray find; 17 – Halushchenko, stray find; 18 – Kaniv District, stray find; 19 – Krylovka, barrow 20, burial 3 (1-19 – iron).

Zimovets 2014, cat. 26]. The main burial mound from Krylovka was dated to the first half of the 5th century based on fragments of a flat-bottomed amphora of the first half of the 5th century BC [Kolotukhin 2000, 60] or even by the first third

or quarter of the century [Koltukhov 2012, 33]. Burial G8 of the Nymphaeum necropolis, judging by the miniature black-figure Attic *lekythos*, was constructed no later than the early 5th century BC [Grach 1999, 100].

Turning southeast to the Caucasus, in the northwest Caucasus, in the Kuban and the Eastern Bosphorus (fig. 5), *akinakai* of the Mircești type are also known both as chance finds, such as those from Gai-Kodzor [Novichikhin 1997, Fig. 2, 2] and the Pashkovskoye-6 settlement [P'ankov, Khachaturova 2003, Fig. 2, 2], and as part of burial complexes. Such daggers, in particular, were found in burial 234-B of the Starokorsunskaya necropolis [Limberis, Marchenko 2001, fig. 36, 4] and in burial 100 of the Rassvet farmstead [Novichikhin 2006, fig. 54, 5; Malyshev 2010, fig. 225, 100]. The latter complex is distinguished by a rich inventory, abundantly represented by Greek imports: a black-glazed Ionian *kylix*, a flat-bottomed amphora with paintings, an amphora "with a glass-shaped bottom", which made it possible to date the burial to the late 6th – early 5th century BC [Malyshev 2010, 137, 219]. Burial 234-B of the Starokorsunskaya necropolis was also attributed to this time period based on a set of bronze arrowheads [Limberis, Marchenko 2013, 123].

Conclusion

The general chronology of reliably dated Mircești-type dagger assemblages spans the late 6th to mid-5th centuries BC, corresponding with the Găiceana type, which is dated to the second half to late 5th century BC. The distribution of these two related types, Găiceana and Mircești, largely overlaps, covering the Carpathian-Danube region, the Dnieper forest-steppe, and the North Caucasus. A significant distinction appears at the western periphery, beyond the lower Dan-

ube, where a territorial division is observed: the Găiceana type extends along the Danube into the Balkans, while Mircești-type *akinakai* are associated with Transylvania and the Tisa region. Although the Găiceana type continues until the end of the 5th century BC, most complexes of both types are concentrated around the early 5th century BC. From the 5th century BC onward, the ornithomorphic pommel was simplified, moving away from realistic forms, and by the end of the century, the design became schematic and ornamental. The typological evolution of antenna pommels, which originally depicted birds of prey, demonstrates a progression from large, realistic representations to minimised, schematic forms, possibly indicating a loss of the earliest symbolic meaning. The earliest Mircești-type *akinakai* with secure chronological markers are found in the Bosphorus and Kuban regions and date to the 6th century BC. The remaining complexes are dated to the first half of the 5th century BC and are mainly associated with the Black Sea steppe region. The dagger from the Orheiul Vechi Reserve Museum is attributed to this period.

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