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**Axes vs. helmets:
Review on a new book about weaponry of Eurasian nomads**

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[Sergey Skoryi, Roman Zymovets, *Bimetallic pickaxes of the Scythian Archaic Period in Eurasia.* Kharkiv: Maidan, 2025, 112 p., ISBN 978-966-372-949-7]

This monograph by Ukrainian researchers Sergei Skory and Roman Zymovets is devoted to a category of weaponry long neglected by scholars: bimetallic war picks (or “pick-axes” by the authors) from the Early Scythian period. The authors attempt a comprehensive analysis of this group of close-combat striking weapons, combining an iron or steel head with a bronze socket. The book is a logical continuation of a number of articles by the researchers [Skory, Zymovets 2023; Skoryi, Zymovets 2023a; Okatenko, Zymovets, Skoryi 2023; Skoryi 2024; Skoryi 2024a], where individual finds or specific aspects have already been examined. However, for the first time, an attempt has been made to assemble a corpus of sources, systematize them, and introduce them into scholarly dissemination as a whole. The book’s title itself indicates its broad chronological and geographic scope: it covers not only finds from the Northern Black Sea region, but also sites in the Caucasus, the Volga region, the Urals, Siberia, and Asia Minor.

Published by “Maidan” Editorial House, the work includes five substantial chapters, supplemented by maps, illustrations, and appendices, as well as summaries in Ukrainian and English. At first glance, the book appears compact – only 112 pages. However, the richness of the factual material, the number of sources used, and the breadth of the subject matter make it a full-fledged scholarly monograph, valuable not only for specialists in the Scythian period but for all researchers of ancient Eurasian weaponry.

Questions related to war pick-axes and related weapon forms were raised as early as the 19th century, when archaeologists recorded the first finds in the Volga and Ural regions. However, for a long time, these discoveries remained sporadic. Mentions of mints are found in the works of



E. Prushevskaja [1917], S.V. Kiselev [1949], A.V. Zbrueva [1952], K.F. Smirnov [1961], A.I. Meliukova [1964], and a number of other researchers. In Soviet archaeology, terminological confusion was particularly noticeable. Some authors used the Russian word “klevets” (horseman pick, hammer-axe), others “chekan” (pick-axe), and still others did not distinguish between these terms at all.

M.P. Griaznov made a significant contribution to the study of Scythian battle axes, proposing back in 1956 to distinguish between chisels and picks based on the shape of the combat part: straight for the pick-axe and beak-shaped for the hammer-axe [Griaznov 1956]. His ideas were developed by N.L. Chlenova [1967], E.V. Chernenko [1980], and others, forming the first typologies.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, interest in the topic increased thanks to the work of A.Iu. Alekseev [1992], A.I. Ivanchik [2001], A.D. Tairov [2010], A.S. Balakhvantsev [2011, 2015] etc. However, the corpus of known finds remained quite limited, which hindered the construction of a coherent picture.

Against this backdrop, the work by S. Skory and R. Zimovets appears both a logical continuation and a qualitative leap. The authors not only summarized the achievements of their predecessors but also significantly expanded their source base: 52 examples of bimetallic axes¹ were included, whereas only about two dozen were known until recently. Notably, they include both museum pieces and published materials, as well as new finds, known primarily from photographs in private collections and online auctions. The authors justify the need to consider such data: ignoring them would artificially narrow our understanding of the weapon's range and variability. The relevance of the study is confirmed by the fact that the bimetallic axes are viewed not only as artifacts of military history but also as cultural markers of the migrations of early nomads in Eurasia. This approach allows us to connect archaeological material with issues of the historical dynamics of steppe societies.

The main strength of the monograph is the volume of material included. The authors collected information on fifty items, a significant portion of which were previously unknown. The sources can be roughly divided into several groups. The first consists of finds from archaeological excavations; these materials are particularly valuable as they come from closed complexes. These include specimens from the Ananyino burial ground in the Volga region, Uygarak in the Aral Sea region, Kichigino in the Southern Urals, and Imirler in Anatolia. Another group consists of stray finds from the 19th and 20th centuries – items from Orikhove (Luhansk region), Okhtyrka (Sumy region) in Ukraine, and several locations in the Caucasus and the Volga region. Finally, new finds

from recent years add novelty to the study. Many of these were recorded using metal detectors and subsequently found their way into private collections. Some information was obtained through auctions or social media.

The authors frankly acknowledge the problem: most new axes lack documented archaeological evidence, and information on the find site is limited to a region or province. However, they rightly note that ignoring this data would distort the overall picture of the artifacts' distribution. Particular attention is paid to the preservation of the artifacts. Around 76% of the specimens have been preserved intact, allowing for morphological analysis. Moreover, unlike heavily corroded specimens from burials, "stray" finds often exhibit impressively good condition.

The monograph is structured logically and consistently. The introduction is followed by five substantive chapters devoted to *typology* (analysis of morphology, the identification types); *chronology* (a discussion of timeframes and dating); *genesis* (a consideration of the origin of form and technology); and *mechanisms of distribution* (an analysis of migration routes and ethnocultural connections, and a *comparison* with bronze cast helmets of the Scythian archaic period). The work closes with a conclusion, a summary in Ukrainian and English, and an extensive bibliography. The extensive illustrative material – maps, diagrams, and photographs of artifacts and components – is beneficial.

The primary methodological tool is typological analysis. The authors identify the following criteria: head shape (narrow pick-shaped or wide blade-shaped); back features (length, shape, presence of holes); bronze socket morphology (caps, rims, smooth surface); and decorative elements (birds of prey heads, rings). Based on these features, the axes are divided into two groups: those with a pick- and blade-shaped head. The first one is a relatively small group (9 items, approximately 19%). The majority (38 items, approximately 81%) are made up of axes with a blade-shaped head. The proposed classification is based on the morphology of the head and butt, which appears justified. The division into sections with pick-shaped and blade-shaped axes reflects fundamental design differences. The authors also draw attention to the variability of bronze socket details (the presence of rims, caps, and images of birds of prey heads). Within

1. However, it can still be supplemented. Besides the item from mound 23 of the Sakar-Chaga-VI burial ground in Turkmenistan [Iablonskii 1996, 43, Fig. 19, 16], where some doubts were expressed [Tairov 2010, 103], there is a pick-axe from mound 1 of the Syrgal-III burial ground in Mongolia [Erdene-Ochir, Batsukh 2018, Fig. 4], which, moreover, is the easternmost find of a bimetallic axe in Eurasia (fig. 1, I).

these sections, types are distinguished based on the shape of the butt and the presence of ribs on the blade. This approach allows for some systematization of the rather heterogeneous material.

Pick-shaped axes are characterized by a narrow, diamond-shaped head, reminiscent of a pick or mattock; the butt is long and straight. These axes are common from the Northern Black Sea region and the Caucasus to the Volga region, the Urals, and Western Siberia, and have also been found in Asia Minor. Authors distinguish two types: one with a narrow, hammer-shaped butt, no wider than the pick. This group includes finds from Okhtyrka, Taman, Armavir, and Turkey. The second type is represented by items with a wide, flat butt (wider than the blade). These include finds from Buguruslan (Urals), Ananyino (Volga region), and Num-to III (Western Siberia). Most of the sockets feature cast heads of birds of prey, usually oriented horizontally.

A much more numerous and widespread group are blade-shaped axes. The blade resembles a double-bladed dagger or akinakes (suggesting a genetic link to this category of weapon?). The butt is wide but shorter than the blade, often with a hole. The authors distinguish three types: the first has a flat blade without ribs, in the form of a simple plate (12 items); a plate with a rib (a significant portion of finds); and other variations, including heavily fragmented specimens.

The bimetallic axes fit within the framework of Scythian Archaic culture, but the authors also point to broader connections – to the traditions of the Urals, the Caucasus, and Asia Minor. Interesting observations about the correlation with akinakai point to a common range of weaponry in the early Scythian era. However, the lack of reliable dating remains a weak point. The authors cautiously acknowledge that axes may not have appeared in different territories simultaneously, and their heyday is associated with military campaigns in Western Asia. Particular attention is paid to the technology: the connection of an iron head with a bronze socket demonstrates the high level of skill of ancient blacksmiths. The authors rightly consider such items to be prestigious, status-bearing weapons, rather than mass-produced. In terms of cultural connections, the role of the Tagar culture of the Minusinsk Basin, where the term “chekan” (pick-axe) became particularly firmly established,

is emphasized. However, the authors are cautious about direct borrowings, suggesting parallel developments in different regions.

The distribution of finds reflects a broad geographic area (fig. 1,I) – from the Black Sea region to Siberia and Asia Minor. The authors see the axes as “markers” of the movements of nomads during the Archaic period. Citing A.Iu. Alekseev [1992; 2003], they emphasize that it is the axes that most closely reflect the routes of the early Scythian wave. Particular attention is paid to Ukraine and the Caucasus, where the most significant number of finds have been recorded in recent years. This is likely due not only to the weapons’ actual popularity but also to the widespread use of metal detectors in these regions. The authors suggest two possible interpretations: the loss of the weapons during battles or the ritual “burial” of the weapons outside of burial grounds. However, both interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

The comparison of axes with bronze cast helmets of the “Kuban type” is of particular interest. The authors draw parallels based on geographic range, time, and, possibly, social context. Both types of weaponry demonstrate a combination of functionality and ornamentation and are associated with elite warriors. Although the functions of helmets and axes significantly differ, and such a comparison may seem somewhat strained, the inclusion of this chapter nevertheless broadens the scope of the study and extends it beyond a narrow typology.

Naturally, the book is not without its controversial aspects. The use of materials from private collections and auctions inevitably raises questions about the accuracy of attribution and localization of finds. The authors themselves acknowledge this shortcoming, but in some cases, they draw far-reaching conclusions based on data whose quality is legitimately questionable. Despite a detailed analysis of the terms “chekan” and “klevets”, a sense of terminological eclecticism remains. These terms were used differently in different regions and at different times, and the definition proposed by the authors, although well-reasoned, does not resolve the issue definitively. Perhaps it would have been worth considering the parallel use of the two terms for different traditions. However, the question of whether this truly reflects migration routes or merely the distribu-

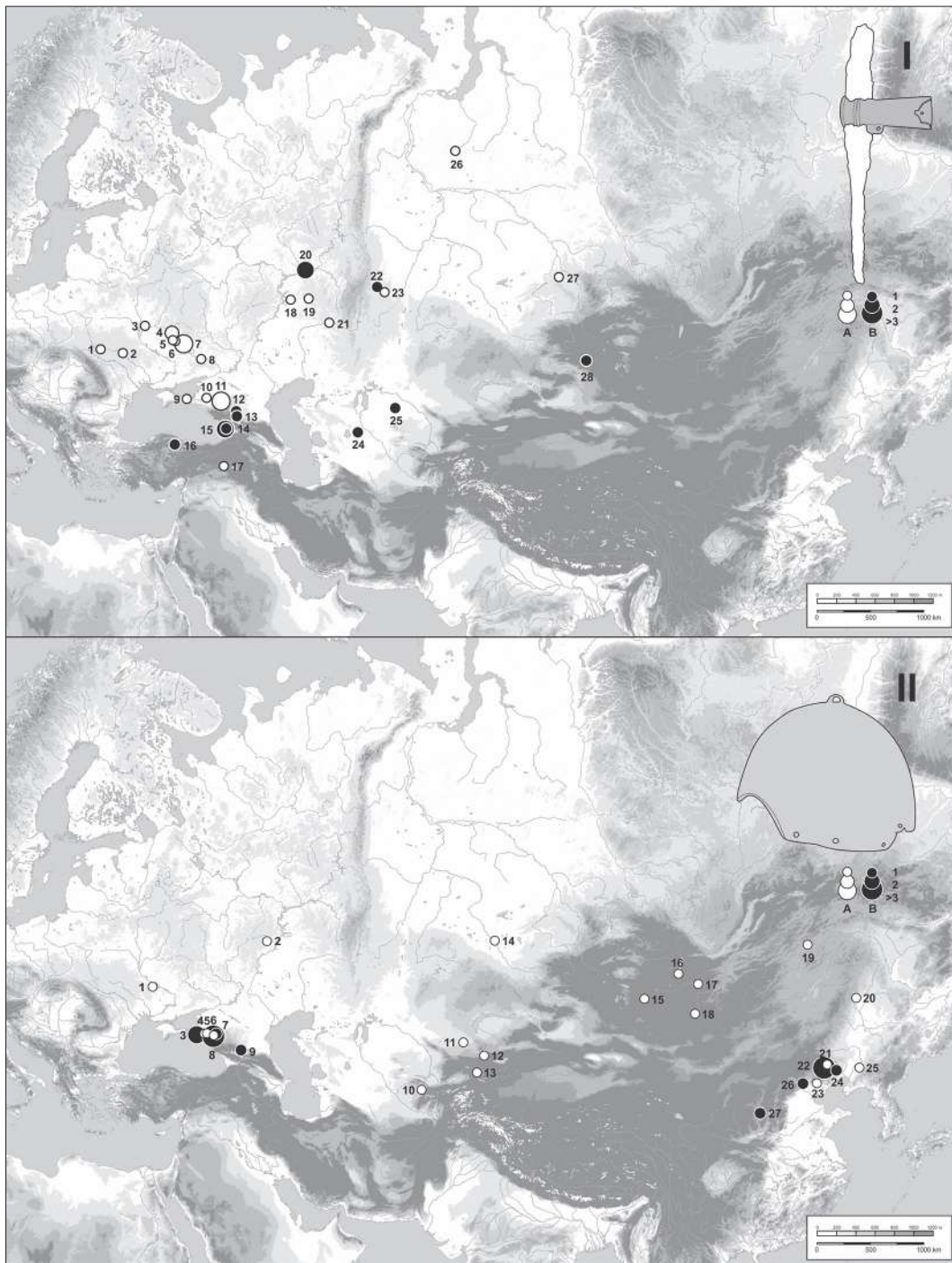


Fig. 1. Distribution of bimetallic pick-axes (I) and Kuban-type helmets (II) in Eurasia (A – stray finds, B – burials).

I – Bimetallic pick-axes: 1 – Ternopil, 2 – Vinnytsia, 3 – Chernihiv, 4 – Sumy, 5 – Okhtyrka, 6 – Sumy-Kharkiv border, 7 – Kharkiv, 8 – Orikhove, 9 – Taman, 10 – Plastunovskaya, 11 – Armavir, 12 – Perkalskaya Skala, 13 – Gundelen (Kendelen), 14 – Tsaishi, 15 – Ergeta, 16 – Imirler, 17 – Muş, 18 – Molgachi, 19 – Buguruslan, 20 – Ananyino, 21 – Sulak Mount, 22 – Kichigino, 23 – Shantarino, 24 – Sakar-Chaga, 25 – Uygarak, 26 – Numto, 27 – Borovaya, 28 – Syrgal.

II – Kuban-type helmets: 1 – Melnyky, 2 – Staryi Picheur, 3 – Krymskaya (Krymsk), 4 – Krasnodar, 5 – Starokorsunskaya, 6 – Progress, 7 – Krasnoe Znamya, 8 – Kelermesskaya, 9 – Nartan, 10 – Afrasiyab (Samarkand), 11 – Jambyl, 12 – Kysmychi (Kysmyshi), 13 – Toguz-Toro, 14 – Upper Irtysh, 15 – Elst-Hoshuu, 16 – Holtost-Nuga, 17 – Emgent-Hoshuu, 18 – Khitruun Mount, 19 – Tunguskyi Olov, 20 – Shilishan, 21 – Meilihe, 22 – Nanshangen, Beishanzui, Xiaoheshigou, Wafangzhong, 23 – Xingcun, 24 – Chifeng, 25 – Liaoning, 26 – Baifu, 27 – Caojiayuan.

tion of individual prestige objects requires a more cautious approach. Some axes may have been trophies, exchange items, or gifts.

The comparison of axes and helmets is intriguing, but not always convincing, especially when it comes to comparing their geographic ranges. Indeed, their areas overlap in many ways and are possibly linked to the routes of nomadic migrations and the areas inhabited by elite groups of early Scythian communities (fig. 1,I-II). These geographic ranges, for example, converge in the North Caucasus, where both bimetallic axes and archaic helmets are represented not only by stray finds but also by burials. Compared to helmets, axes enter further west and are represented by numerous stray finds, for example, from Ukraine. Helmets are also much less common in the Volga region, and are still completely unknown in the Urals. However, the eastern range of helmets could be significantly expanded. In addition to the helmet from Khitruun Mount known to the authors, at least three more have been discovered in Mongolia. Among them are the helmets from Elst-Khoshuu, Emgent-Khoshuu, and Kholtost-Nuga, and a specimen from Transbaikalia, near the Tungusky Olov River [Khudiakov, Erdene-Ochir 2010, Figs. 1-5]. A large number of bronze helmets, extremely close to the Kuban ones both morphologically and chronologically, originate from Northern China during the Western Zhou era (11th-8th centuries BC), prototypes of which can be found in the previous era – the Shang dynasty (16th-11th centuries BC).

Moreover, what is especially important is that in both the North Caucasus and Northern China, these finds are represented by burials. Therefore, the authors of the book are absolutely correct in as-

serting the chronological priority of helmets over bimetallic axes. They are indeed known much further east and much earlier than axes, yet they also disappear from Scythian militaria earlier. True, linking the disappearance of cast bronze helmets with the appearance of steel-headed axes is an original move made by the authors, but somewhat premature. The disappearance could have been due to either the loss of the prestigious status of these items (their obsolescence) or a comprehensive renewal of the militaria of the Scythian armed elites, related to combat tactics or the morphology of arrowheads (starting in the 6th century BC, they lose their massiveness but become more common).

Despite specific controversial points, the monograph is a significant contribution to the archaeology of Eurasia. It introduces new materials, offers a coherent typology, and opens up prospects for further research into the weaponry, social structure, and migrations of nomads. This work will undoubtedly occupy a significant place in the historiography of Scythian archaeology and serve as a starting point for subsequent research, including interdisciplinary studies. S. Skory and R. Zimovets's book, "Bimetallic pickaxes of the Scythian Archaic Period in Eurasia", is an example of conscientious scholarship, combining meticulous source collection with broad historical generalizations. It leaves room for discoveries and interpretations, but precisely for this reason it is its value: it sets the direction for research for many years to come. Without a doubt, the authors have succeeded in transforming a relatively narrow topic into a large-scale study, crucial for understanding the weaponry, ethnocultural connections, and migrations of nomadic communities of the Early Iron Age.

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Denis Topal