

THE “KARASUK” KNIVES IN UKRAINE

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The article presents the Ukrainian finds of knives that originate in the Karasuk culture area. They are divided into two distinct types in respect to their form: the straight ones and the curved ones. Each knife is unique, having either one or two sharp blade sides, a pointed or rounded edge, and a distinct separation between the handle and the blade — or none at all. The closest analogies of these items are provided as well, coming from the Don and Volga river regions, Central Asia (mainly various regions of Kazakhstan) and China. The name “Karasuk knives” is considered artificial and is used in a generalizing manner, as such items are found across a vast territory, far beyond the traditional Karasuk area. One of the Ukrainian finds is completely unique for the Karasuk material complex, as it is not made solely of bronze, but once had an iron blade. The discussion regarding the use of the “Karasuk” knives (mainly whether they could have been used as weapons) is also addressed, as well as the obvious differences between knives and daggers in the Karasuk culture. Since this culture’s material complex includes a rich collection of daggers and swords, it is unlikely that the usage of knives as weapons was widespread among those people. Further evidence for this may be the complete absence of knife depictions on stone stelae, contrasting with other kinds of nomadic weaponry. According to the available dating, several types and variants of the knives continued to coexist for a long period of time. The differences in forms may be an indication that the knives had different purposes for those using them. The presence of such items in Ukraine is further evidence of contact between Eurasian nomads and the North Pontic region at the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age.

Keywords: knives, Karasuk culture, North Pontic region, Central Asia, Bronze Age, Early Iron Age.

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1. Introduction

In recent years seven bronze knives, which have analogies within the material complex of Karasuk culture and its neighbors, have been discovered in Ukraine. Although other artifacts of this culture had been previously known in the North Pontic region (mainly — daggers and swords), the knife finds are a first in Ukrainian archaeology. They were initially introduced at the “Archaeological Studies: achievements and prospects 2024” conference on February 7, 2024. These items — including pictures and descriptions — are now published in English in printed form, along with the analogies. The list of the latter was revised and extended, broadening the map over which such items are distributed.

2. The “Karasuk” knife

To begin with, we should examine what constituted the so-called “Karasuk” knife. The name comes from the works of N. L. Chlenova, who dedicated them to the finds of bladed weapons of Karasuk culture (Chlenova 1976). The name itself is rather artificial, as such finds come from the regions far beyond the area of the culture in question. Still, we will proceed to use this name due to its generalizing nature.

Regarding the appearance of “Karasuk” knives, these are the bronze items, usually 20–25 cm long, which can be divided into two types based on form: straight or curved. Additionally, there are different variants of “Karasuk” knives: with one (most) or two



Fig. 1. The dagger (A) and the knife (B) of the Karasuk culture

sharp blade sides, with pointed or rounded edge, with definitely separated handle and blade, or none at all. The differences between the knife and the dagger of Karasuk culture should also be noted (Fig. 1). The most obvious differences are in form and shape. Also the Karasuk daggers have blades sharpened on both sides as well as pointy edges. The pommel on most of these daggers is mushroom-shaped, while knives usually have a ring-shaped pommel.

3. Straight knives

Regarding the finds, there are currently three known straight “Karasuk” knives found in Ukraine. The knife from the Poltava region is 22–23 cm long (Fig. 2, 1). Its width remains the same from the pommel to the edge, the blade and the handle are visually indistinguishable. Somewhat in the middle of the item, closer to the pommel there is a crack, which could be the result of the damage during excavation. The closest analogy of this knife comes from Anan’ino burial ground in Middle Volga region and was interpreted by S. V. Kuzminyh as an “eastern import” of 5th century BC (Kuzminyh 1983, p. 148). In-

terestingly, just like the item from the Poltava region, this one has a crack in the middle (Fig. 2, 2). According to the classification of S. V. Kuzminyh, this knife belongs to N-8 type (Kuzminyh 1983, table LVII, 4).

The knife from the Sumy region is also 22 cm long (Fig. 2, 3). The handle and blade are of the same width, the transition between them is invisible. Unlike the knife from the Poltava region, this one has only one sharpened side of the blade. The edge is rounded. A similar knife comes from Burial Mound 21 of Uigarak burial ground in Kazakhstan and is attributed to the 7th–5th centuries BC (Gorelik 2003, table II, 20). The only difference is the pointy edge of the analogy (Fig. 2, 4). Therefore, we can assume that the purpose of these two knives was different as the first one (from Sumy region) could only slash, while the second one — from the Uigarak burial ground) — could also be used for stabbing.

A similar knife (although more developed in form) was found during the excavations of a settlement belonging to the Dandybai-Begazi culture near the village of Kent (Central-Eastern Kazakhstan) (Fig. 2, 5) (Varfolomeev, Loman, Evdokimov 2017, Fig. 51, 1). The knife is 25,4 cm long, the blade is wider than the handle (2.2 to 0.4 cm), the mostly straight back is slightly curved outward (Varfolomeev, Loman, Evdokimov 2017, p. 26), the blade is dented at the base, the edge is either rounded or missing. Based on the analogies from the Karasuk area, the item is attributed to IX–VIII century BC (Varfolomeev, Loman, Evdokimov 2017, s. 56). Just like the knife from the Anan’ino burial ground, this item should



Fig. 2. Straight knives: 1. Poltava region; 2. Anan’ino burial ground (after Kuzminyh 1983, table LVII, 4); 3. Sumy region; 4. Uigarak burial ground (after Gorelik 2003, table II, 20); 5. Kent (after Varfolomeev, Loman, Evdokimov 2017, photo 4, 5); 6. Cherkasy region; 7. Korzhar burial ground (after Varfolomeev, Dmitriev, Loman 2019, Fig. 12, 4)

probably be considered an import from the Karasuk area.

The third straight “Karasuk” knife from Ukraine was found in the Cherkasy region (Fig. 2, 6). It is approximately 16 cm in length. The handle is much thinner than the blade, though both are the same length. Such difference might be considered the sign of development, as this form reduced the risk of the hand sliding onto the blade. The edge is also rounded. The knife of the so-called Kazakhstan type could be mentioned as the analogy (Fig 2, 7). This one was discovered at the inventory of a female grave at the Korzhar burial ground of Dandybai-Begazi culture in Central Kazakhstan (Varfolomeev, Dmitriev, Loman 2019, 71, fig. 12, 4). The form generally resembles the Ukrainian find: wide blade, narrow handle. However, the pommel has a closed semi-circular form, also only one side of the blade is sharp. The knife from Korzhar is bigger than the one from Ukraine: 21.2 cm long, the blade is 2,8 cm wide, the handle is 1.9 cm wide (Varfolomeev, Dmitriev, Loman 2019, p. 63).

4. Curved knives

There are currently four curved “Karasuk” knives which have been found in Ukraine. The first one, from the Sumy region, has a rather primitive form, but its pommel is unique for Ukrainian finds — mushroom-shaped with a hole. It is 22 cm long, the blade is curved, sharpened on one side, slightly wider than the handle, making the distinction between two clear. The blade is dented, which can indicate regular use of the item (Fig. 3, 1).

Its close analogy comes from the city of Lai-shevo in Tatarstan (Fig. 3, 2). According to S. V. Kuzminyh, it was used in the 7th–5th centuries BC — during the establishment of relations between the Anan’ino culture and nomadic peoples of Central Asia (Kuzminyh 1983, s. 148). In his classification, it belongs to the N-10 type (Kuzminyh 1983, table LVII, 6). Somewhat distant analogies are the accidental find from the kurgan near Andreevka village in Lower Don region (Fig. 3, 3) (Otroshenko 1994, Fig. 35, 2) and the knife of unknown origin (Fig. 3, 4) (Otroshenko 1994, Fig. 35, 4). The first one overall resembles the Ukrainian item, although lacks a distinct pommel; instead, the hole is located at the end of the handle. The second one also lacks a distinct pommel, and its form is straighter. It is peculiar that its blade is heavily dented, much like on the knife from the Sumy region. There are several other such knives — “hunchbacked” — in Low Don region, however, their resemblance to Ukrainian items is minimal (Otroshenko 1994, Fig. 35, 36). According to V. V. Otroshenko, these knives belong to the 9th–8th centuries BC (Otroshenko 1994, p. 114).

The form of the knife from the Khmelnytskyi region is obviously more developed (Fig. 3, 5). It is 16–17 cm long. The blade is curved, sharpened on one side, clearly wider than the handle. The sharpened side is dented, damaged close to the edge, which itself is lost. The difference in width between the blade and the handle makes the transition clear, further marked by a dull abutment. The pommel has the form of the (cracked) ring with a triangu-



Fig. 3. Curved knives: 1. Sumy region; 2. Laishvevo (after Kuzminyh 1983, table LVII, 6); 3. Andreevka (after Otroshenko 1994, Fig. 35, 2); 4. Lower Don region (after Otroshenko 1994, Fig. 35, 4); 5. Khmelnytskyi region, 6 –8. China (after Mounted Nomads of Asian Steppe 1997, Figs. 13, 123, 16); 9. Lviv region; 10. Ternopil region

lar roller on the top. Such a feature — a ring pommel with a decorative element — is seen on a number of Karasuk daggers, as well as some knives. In each case the decoration is unique. The closest analogies for this knife come from North-Eastern China, where they most likely appear as the result of nomadic incursions from Central Asia. The closer one is dated to the 13th–11th centuries BC. It is quite wide and has a decorated ring pommel, a dull abutment, and a dented blade with lost edge (Fig. 3, 6) (Mounted Nomads of Asian Steppe 1997, Fig. 13). Another knife also has a decorated pommel and a distinct thinner handle and wider blade. Compared to the item from the Khmelnytskyi region and the other knife from China, this one is much thinner. It is at-

tributed to the 6th–5th centuries BC (Fig. 3, 7) (Mounted... 1997, Fig. 123). By the time of publishing, both knives had been stored in Tokyo National Museum.

The knife from the Lviv region features a pair of symmetrical rings forming a pommel. Similar knife from China is dated to the 13th–11th centuries BC (Fig. 3, 8) (Mounted... 1997, Fig. 16). However, the Ukrainian item could be more recent, based on a more technologically refined slotted handle and the more distinct separation from the blade (Fig. 3, 9). Alongside this one, the artifact from the Ternopil region should also be noted — the bronze handle of the knife (Fig. 3, 10). It is generally difficult to classify this knife as a curved one, as most of the blade is lost. However, its complete



Fig. 4. The handles of the knives from the Lviv and Ternopil regions (A); the dagger with a slotted handle and a pair of symmetrical rings forming the pommel from China (B) (after Mounted Nomads of Asian Steppe 1997, Fig. 103)

resemblance to the knife handle from the Lviv region indicates cultural, chronological, and consequently, technological similarity. It is also important to note that the remaining part of the blade is made of iron, which currently makes this the only known Karasuk knife to be made (at least partially) of this metal. In China the tradition of the pommel in the form of a pair of rings (as well as the slotted handle) continues at least until the 6th century BC (Fig. 4, B) (Mounted... 1997, Fig. 103).

5. Purpose

There is a discussion regarding the place and role of “Karasuk” knives within the mate-

rial complex. Specifically, whether they can be considered weapons. The main “pro” arguments include the dimensions of the blade (length and width), as well as a clear distinction between the blade and the handle, with an abutment that prevents the hand from sliding onto the blade. Moreover, it is believed that the curved form could facilitate slashing attacks (Gorelik 2003, pp. 10–11). The weakness of these arguments is quite obvious: modern kitchen knives (which are not legally classified as weapons) can be long, wide, curved etc.

There are only two “contra” arguments, however they are more solid. First of all, Karasuk cold weaponry is well represented by daggers and swords, which are more functional as weapons. Therefore, the existence of another type of weaponry in this context seems redundant. Secondly, unlike many other kinds of weapons (aforementioned daggers and swords, as well as axes, bows etc.) the “Karasuk” knives are entirely absent from steppe stone sculptures.

In this discussion it is important to remember that it concerns a nomadic society, whose members faced countless, constant dangers. Therefore the knives may have served as means of protection (and, circumstantially, tools of violence) among those who could not afford more advanced weapons. However, that does not automatically mean that the “Karasuk” knife should be classified as a weapon.

6. Context

The question, which is directly related to the previous one, is the context of the finds.

Unfortunately, the context is known only for five of the seventeen knives presented in this paper — those from the Anan’ino burial ground (Middle Volga region), Uigarak (Southern Kazakhstan), Korzhar (Central Kazakhstan), the Kent settlement (Central-Eastern Kazakhstan), and a burial mound near Andreevka village (Lower Don region) — in the last case, the was accidental. Regarding all currently known “Karasuk” knives, contextual information is available for only a minority — mostly those found in graves, which allows viewing them as the items of burial rituals. As for the rest, their loss may have occurred naturally — perhaps during migrations or as a result of the death or displacement of their owners, among other causes. In such cases, as with many other bronze artifacts, archaeological context is irretrievably lost.

7. Conclusions

To sum up, the presence of “Karasuk” knives in Ukraine is further evidence of contacts between the North Pontic region and

Central Asia, as well as a sign of east-to-west migration. Despite the small amount of Ukrainian finds (as well as their accidental nature), each of them represents a different type. Eastern analogies of these items belong to quite a wide chronological range — from the 13th to the 5th centuries BC in some cases. This coexistence of forms may suggest two things: their widespread use across eastern Eurasian steppe societies, and that the knife may have been a multifunctional tool within those cultures. The analogies to Ukrainian items are found across a vast territory: in China, Anan’ino and Dandybai-Begazi cultural areas. In the first case, such knives mark the incursions of peoples of the Karasuk culture. In two others — suggest the involvement of the Anan’ino and Dandybai-Begazi societies in these incursions.

The fact that one of the knives is partially made of iron allows us to speak of a symbiosis between local tradition and foreign technology. The raw material was also local, as evidenced by the fact that the analogous items from eastern Eurasia are made exclusively of bronze, as the use of iron there began much later.

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«КАРАСУКСЬКІ» НОЖІ НА ТЕРИТОРІЇ УКРАЇНИ

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У статті вперше опубліковано українські знахідки ножів, що зароджуються в ареалі карасукської культури. Також наведено їхні найближчі аналоги, що охоплюють предмети з Подоння, Поволжя, Центральної Азії та Китаю. Одна з українських знахідок є абсолютно унікальною для карасукського матеріального комплексу, оскільки є біметалевою. Крім того, наведено дискусію стосовно призначення ножів у карасукському суспільстві — насамперед чи можна вважати їх зброєю. Відповідно до наявного датування, можна говорити про співіснування кількох типів і варіантів ножів, причому протягом тривалого періоду часу.

Ключові слова: ножі, карасукська культура, Північне Причорномор'я, Центральна Азія, доба бронзи, доба раннього заліза.

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