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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Stanislav GRIGORIEV

METAL NAMES AND THE INDO-EUROPEAN HOMELAND 5

Mesut KINACI

PHARNACES I OF PONTUS AND THE EXPANSIONIST POLICY
ON THE BLACK SEA: *DYNASTIC AMBITION, MARITIME
STRATEGY, AND HELLENISTIC POWER POLITICS
IN THE SECOND CENTURY BC* 26

Dan DEAC

THE *PROCURATORES PRAESIDIALES* OF DACIA
POROLISSENSIS UNDER ANTONINUS PIUS
AND THE QUEST FOR THE *PRAETORIUM PROCURATORIS*
AT POROLISSUM 34

Fateme EBRAHIMPOUR

TRACING THE ROOTS OF A STRATEGIC MISTAKE
IN SASANIAN TRADE POLICY; A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF THE APPROACHES OF SHAPUR I AND BAHRAM I
TOWARD PALMYRA 44

ARCHAEOLOGY

Oleksandr SYMONENKO, Olena DZNELADZE, Denys SIKOZA

LATE SCYTHIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURE:
A THREATENED PART OF UKRAINIAN
CULTURAL HERITAGE 50

Vasile IARMULSCHI, Sergiu MATVEEV, Dieter QUAST

TEST EXCAVATIONS AT THE ROMAN-AGE NECROPOLIS
OF CAȘUNCA (FLOREȘTI DISTRICT,
REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA) 71

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Mihai DUNCA

GROUND STONE TOOLS FROM MOȘNIȚA NOUĂ –
OBJECTIVE 4 SITE 81

Cristian Ioan POPA

THE BRONZE ARTEFACT FROM THE WIETENBERG
CEMETERY IN SIBIȘENI 98

Monica MĂRGĂRIT, Gruia FAZECAȘ, Florin GOGĂLTAN

BRONZE AGE DEER ANTLER PROCESSING WORKSHOP AT
SÂNTION – DEALUL MĂNĂSTIRII
(BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA) 106

Lidia GONZÁLEZ ESTRADA

PROTECTIVE AMULETS FOR CHILDREN:
VULNERABILITY AND CARE IN ROMAN HISPANIA 125

Erdal ÜNAL - Vildan CAN - H. Ertuğ ERGÜNER

A HOLY RIDER AMULET FROM SYEDRA 159

Sara RADOVIĆ

AN INSCRIBED EARLY BYZANTINE FIBULA FROM SERBIA:
SOME REMARKS ON THE CULT OF SAINT MENAS
IN THE BALKANS 166

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL AND REPORTS

Manuela MĂIȚĂ MAXIM

EARLY ROMAN POTTERY (2ND –3RD CENTURIES AD)
DISCOVERED IN A BUILDING WITHIN A RURAL
SETTLEMENT IN THE TERRITORY OF TOMIS 178

EPIGRAPHY AND PAPYROLOGY

Antonio AGUILERA MARTÍN, Juan Manuel BERMÚDEZ LORENZO

TITULI PICTI BETA ON DRESSSEL 20 AMPHORAE
FROM THE COLLECTION OF EMILIO RODRÍGUEZ ALMEIDA
FROM MONTE TESTACCIO (ROME) 206

NUMISMATICS

Abdullah Yavuz AKINCI

AGONISTIC DEPICTIONS AND SPORTS CULTURE ON COINS
FROM THE CITIES OF PISIDIA DURING THE ROMAN
IMPERIAL PERIOD 214

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Gligor M. SAMARDŽIĆ, Lazar D. AKSENTIJEVIĆ

SERBIAN JOURNALS OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH
AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY ON THE
POSITION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE 221

IN MEMORIAM

Mihaela GLIGOR

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOLITUDE:
IUDITA WINKLER (1925-1985) 229

REVIEWS

Vitalie BÂRCĂ

Denis Topal, Griffin Daggers of the Issyk Type and the Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia. [In Russian], Almaty: NITSIA Begazy-Tasmola, 2024, 224 p. ISBN 978-601-7106-96-6 250

Vitalie BÂRCĂ

Alin Henț, Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities, Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2025, 259 p. ISBN 978-606-020-997-3 256

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Reviews

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Denis Topal, *Griffin Daggers of the Issyk Type and the Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia*. [In Russian], Almaty: NITSIA Begazy-Tasmola, 2024, 224 p. ISBN 978-601-7106-96-6.

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The study of offensive weaponry used by nomadic communities of the Iron Age represents one of the classical directions of Eurasian archaeological research. For more than a century, weapons discovered in burial complexes, hoards, sanctuaries, and isolated finds have served not only as an essential source for reconstructing military technology, but also as a fundamental tool for investigating population mobility, cultural contacts, and the mechanisms through which innovations spread across the vast Eurasian steppe zone. Within this context, the *akinakes* – the emblematic weapon of the Scythian world – has always occupied a privileged position in scholarly literature, becoming one of the most important criteria employed in establishing regional chronologies and identifying connections among the various population groups that inhabited the Eurasian steppes during the first millennium BC.

Despite the impressive number of discoveries and the substantial body of scholarship devoted to this weapon, many issues concerning its origin, evolution, and distribution remain insufficiently clarified. This situation is particularly evident in the eastern regions of the Scythian world, where archaeological documentation has increased exponentially in recent decades, without this accumulation of information always being accompanied by synthetic studies capable of coherently integrating the new data.

It is within this scholarly context that Denis Topal's monograph, *Griffin*

*Daggers of the Issyk Type and the Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia*¹, published in Almaty in 2024 and dedicated to the centenary of the renowned Kazakh archaeologist Kemal Akishev, should be situated. The volume represents a natural continuation of the author's long-standing interest in Scythian weaponry and complements his earlier investigations devoted to the *akinakai* of the western extremity of the Scythian world, particularly *Akinakes in the West of Scythian World* (2021)². Owing to the breadth of its documentation and its synthetic character, the book may be regarded as one of the most significant recent contributions to the study of bladed weapons among the early nomads of Eurasia, especially *akinakai* and daggers whose hilts terminate in griffin-shaped motifs.

The structure of the volume is preceded by several introductory texts that significantly contribute to contextualizing the research. The book opens with a short text in Kazakh by A. Z. Bejsenov, *The Issyk Burial Ground, Kemal Akishev and Beken Nurmukhanbetov, and About This Book*³ (p. 7), which recalls the importance of the famous burial complex at Issyk and the fundamental contributions made by Kemal Akishev and Beken Nurmukhanbetov to the development of Kazakh archaeology. The text has a distinctly commemorative character and establishes the intellectual framework within which Denis Topal's monograph should be understood.

This is followed by the extensive preface entitled *Preface to Denis Topal's Monograph „Griffin Daggers of the Issyk Type and the Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia”*⁴ (pp. 9–16), in which A. Z. Bejsenov highlights the place of the volume within current research on Scythian weaponry and emphasizes the author's contribution to the systematization and reinterpretation of a vast corpus of discoveries originating from eastern Eurasia. The preface is particularly valuable because it underscores not only the importance of the material under consideration but also the methodological challenges inherent in a study covering such a vast territory and such a diverse body of evidence.

The introductory section concludes with a preamble entitled *From the Author*⁵ (pp. 17–20), in which Denis Topal presents the genesis of the work, the objectives of the research, and the principal methodological directions underlying his investigation. The author explains the reasons that motivated the choice of the topic and highlights the necessity of reassessing traditional classifications and chronologies in light of the discoveries made during recent decades, which have substantially altered the available

documentary basis. These introductory pages go well beyond the function of a simple preface and provide the reader with important reference points for understanding the scholarly approach developed in the chapters that follow.

The volume is organized into four principal chapters: *History of Research on Scythian-Period Bladed Weapons*⁶ (pp. 21–38); *Major Issues in the Study of Eurasian Akinakai*⁷ (pp. 39–72); *Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia*⁸ (pp. 73–96) and *The Evolution of Akinakai with Antenna-Hilt Handles*⁹ (pp. 97–186). These are followed by conclusions¹⁰ (pp. 187–188), a bibliography (pp. 189–217), abbreviations (pp. 217–219), summaries in Kazakh, Russian, and English (pp. 220–223), and a particularly rich illustrative apparatus consisting of 66 figures. This latter component constitutes one of the strengths of the volume, including numerous distribution maps, technical drawings, photographs, and comparative plates that directly support the author's arguments and facilitate the verification of the typological observations formulated throughout the study.

From the introductory pages onward, it becomes clear that Denis Topal did not intend to produce merely a catalogue of finds or a descriptive classification. The scope of the research is considerably broader and consists in reconstructing the processes of evolution, diffusion, and transformation of bladed weaponry within the nomadic world of Eurasia, as well as identifying the cultural relationships that enabled the circulation of forms and technological traditions across impressive distances.

The first chapter, *History of Research on Scythian-Period Bladed Weapons* (pp. 21–38), is devoted to the historiography of research. Far from being a simple survey of scholarly literature, this section provides a critical analysis of the principal directions that have shaped the study of Scythian weaponry over the past century.

The author traces the evolution of interpretations from the earliest classification attempts formulated within Imperial Russian and Soviet archaeology to the recent contributions of scholars from the post-Soviet and European academic worlds. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which the principal typological categories were defined and to the criteria employed in distinguishing the various forms of the *akinakes*.

An important merit of the chapter is that it highlights the dynamic character of research. The author demonstrates that many classifications now regarded as canonical were originally based on limited bodies of evidence and that the expansion of field research has substantially modified the earlier picture. In this sense, the historiography of research is employed not only to present existing scholarship but also to identify issues that continue to require clarification.

Particularly useful is the discussion of the contributions made by Kemal Akishev and the Kazakh school of

¹ Денис Топал, *Грифовые кинжалы типа Иссык и акинаки востока Евразии*, Алматы: НИЦИА Бегазы-Тасмола, 2024, 224 с. ISBN 978-601-7106-96-6.

Denis Topal, *Grifovye kinzhaly tipa Issyk i akinaki vostoka Evrazii*, Almaty: NITSIA Begazy-Tasmola, 2024, 223 p. ISBN 978-601-7106-96-6.

² Денис Топал, *Акинак на западе скифского мира*. Biblioteca „Tyragetia” XXXV (Кишинэу: Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei) // Denis Topal, *Akinak na zapade skifskogo mira*. Biblioteca „Tyragetia” XXXV (Chișinău: Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei).

³ *Есік қорымы, Кемал Ақышев пен Бекен Нұрмұханбетов және осы кітап жайлы* (с. 7).

⁴ *Предисловие к монографии Дениса Топала „Грифовые кинжалы типа Иссык и акинаки востока Евразии”* (с. 9-16).

⁵ *От автора* (с. 17-20).

⁶ Глава 1. *История изучения клинкового оружия скифской эпохи* (с. 21-38).

⁷ Глава 2. *Основные проблемы изучения евразийских акинаков* (с. 39-72).

⁸ Глава 3. *Акинаки востока Евразии* (с. 73-96).

⁹ Глава 4. *Эволюция акинаков с рукоятями антенновидного типа* (с. 97-186).

¹⁰ *Заклучение* (с. 187-188).

archaeology, whose investigations played a decisive role in advancing our understanding of the weaponry of the early nomads of Central Asia. The decision to dedicate the volume to the centenary of the great Kazakh archaeologist therefore represents not merely a commemorative gesture but also an acknowledgment of the profound impact his work has had on the development of the field.

The second chapter, *Major Issues in the Study of Eurasian Akinakai* (pp. 39–72), constitutes the theoretical and methodological foundation of the entire monograph. Here the author addresses issues related to the definition of the *akinakes*, the delimitation of its various typological variants, and the chronological difficulties associated with this category of weaponry.

One of the most interesting observations concerns the often ambiguous nature of the term *akinakes*. In scholarly literature, the term has been used to designate weapons that differ considerably in size, form, and function. Denis Topal demonstrates that this situation has generated numerous misunderstandings and contributed to contradictory interpretations regarding the evolution of Scythian weaponry.

The author insists upon the necessity of an approach grounded in the detailed analysis of morphological characteristics and emphasizes the importance of correlating typological data with information derived from securely dated archaeological contexts. In this respect, the monograph belongs to a scholarly tradition that prioritizes material evidence and the rigorous verification of chronological hypotheses.

Another important aspect is the broad geographical perspective adopted by the author. Rather than limiting the analysis to a single region, Denis Topal examines discoveries originating from across the entire Eurasian space, enabling him to trace the processes of diffusion and transformation affecting different categories of weapons. This comparative approach constitutes one of the principal strengths of the work and becomes even more evident in the chapters that follow.

Particularly noteworthy are the discussions concerning the emergence of oversized swords and daggers and their relationship to pre-Scythian weapon traditions. The author critically examines existing hypotheses and proposes new interpretations regarding the origins of forms previously regarded as exclusively Scythian. The analysis demonstrates an excellent command of the relevant scholarship and a remarkable capacity to integrate data derived from widely separated regions of Eurasia.

Taken together, the first two chapters establish the conceptual foundation of the study. They demonstrate that the author's objective is not merely the production of a new typological classification, but also the reassessment of fundamental questions concerning the genesis and evolution of weaponry characteristic of the early nomads. Through the breadth of documentation and the critical character of the analysis, this introductory section transcends the function of a simple preliminary survey and constitutes a valuable contribution to the historiography of Scythian weapon studies.

If the first two chapters establish the historiographical and methodological framework of the research, the core of the monograph is represented by the chapters *Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia* (pp. 73–96) and *The Evolution of Akinakai with Antenna-Hilt Handles* (pp. 97–186). These sections constitute the analytical nucleus of the volume and offer the author's most original contributions to the study of the weaponry of the early nomads of Eurasia.

The third chapter, devoted to the *akinakai* of eastern Eurasia, begins with a fundamental observation: although these weapons are frequently mentioned in scholarly literature, their study has often remained fragmented, being restricted to regional or national contexts. As a result, many interpretations concerning their origin and evolution have been formulated on the basis of relatively limited groups of finds. Denis Topal seeks to overcome this situation by bringing together, within a single analytical framework, materials originating from Kazakhstan, the Altai, Tuva, Mongolia, and other regions of Central and Eastern Asia.

One of the chapter's principal merits lies in the systematic nature of its documentation. The author inventories and compares an impressive number of specimens, identifying both common features and regional peculiarities. The analysis demonstrates that the eastern *akinakes* cannot be reduced to a single morphological model, but rather represents the outcome of a complex process of development and adaptation extending over several centuries.

In this regard, Denis Topal pays particular attention to the constructional characteristics of the weapons: the form of the guard, the type of hilt, blade proportions, hilt terminals, and decorative techniques. These elements are not treated merely as descriptive details but as indicators of relationships among the various cultural groups inhabiting the Eurasian steppes. Consequently, typological analysis becomes a tool for investigating contacts and the circulation of technological ideas on a continental scale.

Especially noteworthy are the observations concerning the geographical distribution of certain variants. The author demonstrates that some types previously regarded as specific to a single region actually occur across a much broader area. This finding has important implications for understanding the mobility of nomadic populations and the intensity of contacts among communities inhabiting the Eurasian steppe zone.

Another remarkable aspect of the chapter is the attention devoted to archaeological contexts. The author insists that the chronological and cultural value of an object cannot be established solely on the basis of its morphological characteristics. For this reason, each typological category is discussed in relation to the burial complexes or settlements from which it derives, lending the analysis considerable methodological strength.

This approach is equally evident in the discussion of chronology. The author demonstrates that many traditional chronological frameworks require substantial revision. In some cases, certain forms appeared earlier than previously assumed, while others remained in use considerably longer than suggested by classical schemes. Consequently, the chapter provides not only a typological classification but also an important contribution to refining the chronology of the Scythian period in eastern Eurasia.

Special attention is devoted to the famous Issyk-type daggers, one of the most spectacular categories of weaponry analyzed in the volume. Characterized by griffin protomes executed in the Animal Style, these pieces occupy a special place in scholarship because of both their artistic and symbolic value. The author convincingly demonstrates that they should be viewed not merely as functional weapons but also as prestige objects associated with specific social and ideological contexts.

Topal's analysis extends beyond purely typological concerns and addresses the cultural implications of zoomorphic decoration. In doing so, he successfully places the study of weaponry within the broader context of Scythian Animal Style art and the symbolic systems of the nomadic world. This interdisciplinary perspective represents one of the major strengths of the volume, demonstrating that weapons may serve as essential sources not only for military history but also for understanding mentalities and cultural imagination.

If the third chapter is devoted primarily to the presentation and classification of the material, the fourth chapter, *The Evolution of Akinakai with Antenna-Hilt Handles* (pp. 97–186), represents the true synthetic contribution of the monograph. Extending over nearly ninety pages, it constitutes the most substantial and complex section of the volume.

The chapter focuses on the evolution of antenna-hilted *akinakai*, a category of weaponry that occupies a central place in the study of Scythian cultures and the early nomads of Eurasia. Although these weapons have attracted scholarly attention since the first half of the twentieth century, questions concerning their origins, chronology, and development have continued to generate contradictory interpretations. Drawing upon a corpus of evidence substantially larger than that available to earlier researchers, Denis Topal revisits the entire problem and offers a systematic analysis of the principal evolutionary stages of this weapon type.

The method employed is impressive in both rigor and clarity. The author develops a gradual analysis, beginning with morphological characteristics and continuing with an examination of geographical distribution and chronological contexts. This strategy enables him to trace successive transformations of the various variants and to identify the relationships among them.

The result is a detailed reconstruction of the evolutionary processes affecting this category of weapons. Denis Topal demonstrates that antenna-hilted *akinakai* do not constitute a uniform category but rather a complex assemblage of forms that evolved at different rates across different regions of Eurasia. Some variants enjoyed a very wide distribution, while others remained restricted to specific geographical areas. This diversity reflects both local adaptations and processes of interaction among different nomadic communities.

One of the most interesting aspects of the chapter is the analysis of the relationship between western and eastern traditions of Scythian weaponry. The author demonstrates that many characteristics previously regarded as specific to a single region actually occur in a much wider variety

of contexts. Consequently, the image of a Scythian world fragmented into completely independent traditions is replaced by that of a cultural space characterized by intense contacts and continuous exchanges of ideas and technologies.

This conclusion is particularly important because it contributes to overcoming excessively regionalist interpretations. Rather than treating different population groups as isolated entities, the author correctly emphasizes the existence of interaction networks linking vast territories across Eurasia. From this perspective, the *akinakes* becomes not merely a weapon but also an indicator of processes of cultural communication.

Equally noteworthy is the manner in which the author addresses chronology. Rather than accepting existing chronological schemes uncritically, he re-evaluates each evolutionary stage and proposes numerous adjustments. In many cases, the argumentation is supported by recently discovered burial contexts, which lends a high degree of credibility to the conclusions.

Beyond its analytical value, the chapter is also impressive for the richness of its graphical documentation. The numerous comparative plates allow readers to follow directly the morphological transformations discussed in the text and facilitate verification of the author's arguments. In this respect, the illustrative apparatus does not serve merely a complementary role but becomes an integral component of the scholarly demonstration.

Indeed, one of the major strengths of the entire volume is the exceptional quality of its illustrations. Distribution maps, technical drawings, and photographs are produced to a very high professional standard and contribute decisively to the clarity of the exposition. For a study centered on typological and chronological analysis, this aspect is essential. Readers are constantly able to compare the author's observations with the illustrated material, substantially enhancing the scientific value of the monograph.

Taken together, the third and fourth chapters demonstrate the author's ability to combine meticulous typological analysis with a broad perspective on the cultural processes that shaped the nomadic world of Eurasia. They transform the volume from a simple catalogue of weapons into a major contribution to the study of cultural contacts, mobility, and technological transfer during the Scythian period.

The final section of the monograph, embodied in the author's concise conclusions (pp. 187–188), represents the culmination of an extensive and rigorously documented investigation carried out throughout nearly two hundred pages. Although relatively brief in length, the conclusions successfully synthesize the principal results of the analysis and highlight their implications for the study of the weaponry of the early nomads of Eurasia. At the same time, they provide the interpretative key to the entire scholarly undertaking, demonstrating that the significance of the volume extends far beyond the formulation of a new typological classification.

In essence, the author argues that the evolution of the *akinakai* and Issyk-type daggers must be understood within the framework of complex processes of cultural interaction that unfolded across vast areas of Eurasia. The comparative

analysis of the archaeological material demonstrates that the development of weaponry did not follow isolated regional trajectories but rather resulted from continuous contacts among communities separated by considerable distances. From this perspective, weapons emerge as privileged indicators of the circulation of technologies, ideas, and symbols within the nomadic world.

One of the volume's most important contributions lies in its reassessment of the relationship between the eastern and western traditions of Scythian weaponry. In scholarly literature, these two spheres have often been examined separately, encouraging fragmented interpretations. The author convincingly demonstrates that numerous forms and constructional features transcend these conventional divisions and point to much closer connections than previously assumed. In doing so, the monograph contributes to overcoming excessively regionalist perspectives and offers an integrative vision of cultural phenomena across the Eurasian steppes.

The significance of this research becomes even more evident when placed within the context of recent historiography. Over the last decades, the study of Eurasian nomadic cultures has undergone remarkable development, stimulated both by intensified fieldwork and by the application of new analytical methods. Discoveries from Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Altai, and other regions of Central Asia have substantially transformed traditional views of the Scythian world, creating a need for new syntheses. Denis Topal's monograph responds precisely to this need by bringing together, within a coherent framework, an impressive quantity of information that had previously remained dispersed across publications of highly variable accessibility.

A major achievement of the author is his ability to transform typological analysis into an instrument of historical investigation. Although the study is based on highly specific categories of artefacts, its conclusions extend far beyond the narrow field of weapon studies. The evolution of different types of *akinakai* is employed to discuss processes of mobility, cultural contact, technological transfer, and social change. In this respect, the volume follows an important direction in contemporary archaeology that interprets material culture not merely as an expression of technical traditions but also as a reflection of complex historical processes.

From a methodological perspective, the work is distinguished by its balance between description and interpretation. In many studies devoted to ancient weaponry, emphasis is placed almost exclusively on classification and the definition of types. Denis Topal successfully avoids this limitation. Without sacrificing typological rigor, he consistently integrates morphological observations into broader discussions concerning chronology, geographical distribution, and the cultural significance of the objects under examination. The result is a study that combines technical precision with a comprehensive historical perspective.

Equally noteworthy is the international character of the documentation. The bibliography reflects a profound familiarity both with scholarship produced in the former Soviet academic sphere and with Western literature devoted

to weaponry and the nomadic cultures of Eurasia. This openness is essential for overcoming academic barriers that have long affected the study of the Scythian world. By bringing together and critically discussing works originating from different scholarly traditions, the author contributes to the development of a necessary and fruitful scientific dialogue.

Another important quality of the monograph is the clarity of its argumentation. Even in the most technical passages, devoted to classifications and morphological comparisons, the discussion remains easy to follow thanks to the rigorous structure of the volume and the effective use of illustrations. This aspect is particularly important because the book is addressed not only to specialists in ancient weaponry but also to scholars interested in broader questions concerning the archaeology of the Eurasian steppes.

The illustrative apparatus likewise deserves special recognition. The numerous plates, drawings, and distribution maps do not serve a merely decorative function but actively participate in the construction of the argument. Their technical quality facilitates the understanding of typological differences and allows readers to verify directly the observations advanced in the text. In a study so heavily dependent upon the analysis of forms and constructional details, this represents a considerable advantage.

Naturally, like any synthetic work, the monograph raises a number of issues that will continue to be debated in future scholarship. Some of the chronological proposals advanced by the author will undoubtedly require further verification as new discoveries are published. Similarly, certain interpretations regarding the directions of diffusion of particular weapon types may be refined in the future. Such observations, however, should not be regarded as limitations of the study; rather, they reflect the dynamic character of the field and the volume's capacity to generate new research questions.

Indeed, one of the book's most significant achievements is precisely that it provides a new point of departure for future investigations. Through the breadth of the corpus analyzed and the systematic character of its interpretations, the monograph establishes a methodological benchmark that will be difficult to ignore in subsequent research devoted to Scythian weaponry and the nomadic cultures of Eurasia.

From a broader perspective, the work demonstrates once again the exceptional potential of weapon studies as a source for reconstructing historical processes. The weapons examined here appear not merely as instruments of combat but also as objects imbued with social, cultural, and symbolic meanings. They reflect power relations, contacts between communities, and mechanisms for the transmission of technological traditions. Consequently, the study contributes not only to the history of weaponry but also to a deeper understanding of the societies that produced and used these objects.

In conclusion, we would like to express our appreciation for the author's effort to collect and systematize a vast body of archaeological material originating from regions that have often remained at the periphery of the major syntheses devoted to the Scythian world. Through the rigor of its documentation, the clarity of its argumentation, and

the breadth of its comparative perspective, Denis Topal has produced a work that stands as one of the most important recent contributions to the study of the weaponry of the early nomads of Eurasia. Beyond its concrete results concerning the typology and chronology of the *akinakai*, the fundamental merit of the monograph lies in its capacity to integrate disparate data into a coherent interpretation and to demonstrate the essential role of weaponry in

understanding the historical and cultural processes that shaped the Eurasian steppes during the first millennium BC. Through the questions it raises and the new avenues of research it opens, the volume possesses all the prerequisites necessary to become a standard reference work within the international bibliography devoted to Scythian cultures and ancient Eurasian weaponry.