



# JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Institute of Archeology and Art History of  
Romanian Academy Cluj-Napoca  
Technical University Of Cluj-Napoca



**JAHA**  
JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY  
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

# Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v9i3>

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN-L 2360 266x



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JOURNALS

**No. 9.3 /2022**



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Design & layout:  
Petru Ureche



### LATE SCYTHIAN CULTURE OF THE LOWER DNEIPEER: THE ISSUE OF ORIGIN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The hypothesis of the origin of Lower Dnieper variant of the Late Scythian culture is discussed in the paper. It is assumed that the Scythian population, who has built the hillforts along the banks of the Lower Dnieper, moved there around mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE from the Dniester region (the subculture of Tiraspol barrows). This date is confirmed by the materials of Late Scythian necropolis where there are no burials older than the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The impetus for the resettlement was the military activity of the Bastarnae and Getae in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

**Keywords:** *Late Scythians, Lower Dnieper, hillfort, necropolis, Tiraspol barrows, Siraci, Maeoti.*

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DOI: 10.14795/j.v9i3.794

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

The first researchers of the Lower Dnieper sites Arsenii Chirkov and Viktor Goshkevich considered the hillforts of the Lower Dnieper to be Greek, closely connected by trade relations with Olbia<sup>2</sup> or founded on the banks of the Dnieper by emigrants from Olbia in the Hellenistic time.<sup>3</sup> Goshkevich even called these hillforts “*Dnieper feeding points*” of the Olbiopolites. Irina Fabritsius saw in the Lyubymivka hillfort a resemblance to Roman military fortifications.<sup>4</sup> But this was Michail Rostovtsev who has sighted the barbarian elements in the culture of Lower Dnieper hillforts and considered them the agricultural and trading settlements with a semi-Greek and semi-Scythian population.<sup>5</sup> The researchers of Late Scythian sites (Michail Artamonov, Boris Grakov, Natalia Elagina, Natalia Pogrebova, Maria Vyazmitina, Pavel Shults) came to the conclusion about their genetic connection with an earlier Scythian culture of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE,<sup>6</sup> and the Late Scythian culture was considered as belonging to the descendants of the steppe Scythians of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE who had settled and changed the nomadic pastoral economy to the agricultural and pastoral economy inherent in the settled population.

However, there are alternative points of view. Yuri Zajtsev believes that the Late Scythian culture in Crimea was created by the Iranian-speaking eastern tribes (Satharcheos-Tocharians-Taphrians) who, together with the Sarmatians, invaded the Northern Pontic region in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century

<sup>1</sup> This paper is revised and updated English version of the work in Russian SYMONENKO 2016.

<sup>2</sup> CHIRKOV 1867, 549.

<sup>3</sup> GOSHKEVICH 1913, 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> FABRITSIUS 1927, 13.

<sup>5</sup> ROSTOVTSEV 1918, 82.

<sup>6</sup> ARTAMONOV 1948, 58.

BCE and formed a new population of the Crimea.<sup>7</sup> Nadija Gavrilyuk and Valentina Krapivina proposed their own hypothesis of the origin of the Late Scythian sites of the Lower Dnieper, which is a synthesis of the points of view of Michail Rostovtsev, Viktor Goshkevich and the author's assumptions. According to their version, natives of Olbia and its Chora participated in the foundation of the Lower Dnieper hillforts. They contributed to the further Hellenization of the local population which intensified after the resettlement here in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE of part of the Olviopolites who fled from the Getic invasion. Taking into account the hypothetical polyethnicity of the population of the Lower Dnieper hillforts the authors proposed to call these sites not "Late Scythian" but "post-Scythian".<sup>8</sup>

This point of view is highly controversial. The term of Gavrilyuk and Krapivina is incorrect, if only from the standpoint of the stylistics of language: the term "post-Scythian" means "after Scythian" and can be applied to any culture that existed after the Scythians – Sarmatian, Gothic, Hunnic, etc.: they all are "post-Scythian". As for historical correctness there are objections here too: there is no confident evidence of polyethnicity of the population of Lower Dnieper hillforts, this is nothing more than the authors' assumption.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there are serious arguments in favour of the Scythian cultural (and, most likely, ethnic) affiliation of these people. This is a transformed Scythian funeral rite (catacombs), main types of handmade pottery, data of anthropology. Undoubtedly, the trade and political ties between the inhabitants of hillforts and antique cities (primarily Olbia) existed as well as a certain Hellenization of the culture of Late Scythian population but the final solution of the question of its degree and realization is a matter for future research. To date the generally accepted name of the culture and its sites – "Late Scythian" – fully corresponds to the data of written sources and archaeology.

Here one more hypothesis of the origin of this culture (in any case, of its Lower Dnieper variant) is proposed. The starting position of this version was the fact that no layers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE have been traced at the any Late Scythian hillfort. The point of view on the continuity of the Scythian settlements of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE and Late Scythian hillforts was constructed on the materials of Kamenka hillfort, near which (but not on which!) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Znamenka hillfort arose, and of Belozerka settlement which turned out to be the antique one.<sup>10</sup> This error was extrapolated to other Late Scythian sites, so to speak, by a "logical" way, relying on single finds of Hellenistic coins and amphorae fragments and ignoring the absence of the cultural layers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

Gavrilyuk gives the information about such finds at several sites. According to her data 22% of the amphorae of Annivka hill-fort date back to the Hellenistic period;

amphorae fragments of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE are presented among the materials of Zolota Balka,<sup>11</sup> the remains of hearths and several household pits of the Hellenistic period on the Havrylivka and Znamyanka hillforts were found.<sup>12</sup> Based on these data Gavrilyuk rightly believes that "there is no need to talk about the complete disappearance of the sites of settled way of life in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE; some small part of the Scythian steppe population continued to live on the right bank of the Dnieper even during the crisis".<sup>13</sup> Without disputing this statement in any way, it is worth, however, to think about the connection between these "unfortified sites" (Gavrilyuk) at the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE with the Late Scythian hillforts, whose cultural layer and the earliest graves of burial grounds date back to no earlier than the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. It is unlikely that the small population of "a small number of sites of the settled people ... continued to control the waterway along the Dnieper"<sup>14</sup> – they simply would not have had the strength and capabilities for this. This assumption seems as unreal as the caravan routes in depopulated steppes of North-Western Pontic region of the "crisis" time, reconstructed by Zajtsev<sup>15</sup> based on military ritual deposits (which itself unlikely speaks of their "caravan" nature) with a controversial date (3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE).

Most likely, they were the remains of the previous population which possibly later were included into the inhabitants of the Lower Dnieper hillforts.

All objects on the hillforts were found in the archaeological context of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE. Their fortifications are dated in the same way (in any case on the excavated sites).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the point of view about the founding of the hillforts of the Lower Dnieper in the early Hellenistic Age is not confirmed by archaeological materials. Of course, the final ascertainment of the time of foundation of each of them is possible only after careful excavations but according to the current state of sources it will not be a mistake to assert that the Late Scythian hillforts of the Lower Dnieper arose not earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

The second component of the proposed hypothesis is the admission just of the Scythian ethnic and cultural affiliation of the founders of hillforts. But the Late Scythians were not direct descendants of the local Scythians of previous time who settled on by some unknown reason. The process of formation of the Late Scythian culture looks somewhat different and not so simply.

Until recently it was customary to consider that the classical Scythian culture with its archaeological components – the barrows, hillforts and settlements – ceases to exist in the steppe and forest-steppe of Ukraine at the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE, and the sites later than the beginning

<sup>7</sup> ZAJTSEV 1999, 142-144, 147.

<sup>8</sup> GAVRILYUK/KRAPIVINA 2005, 68-69.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the doubtfulness of Greeks presence among the population of the Lower Dnieper hillforts is confirmed by the absence of indispensable attribute of antique site – inscriptions in the form of graffiti, dedications, etc. (cf. the epigraphics of Scythian Neapolis).

<sup>10</sup> BYLKOVA 2007, 21.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the dating of amphorae from Late Scythian sites dated 50 or more years ago requires the verification according to modern literature since many of them have changed both towards older date and vice versa.

<sup>12</sup> GAVRILYUK 2013, 152.

<sup>13</sup> GAVRILYUK 2013, 152.

<sup>14</sup> GAVRILYUK 2013, 153.

<sup>15</sup> ZAJTSEV 2012, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. VIAZMITINA 1969, 122.

of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE are absent.<sup>17</sup> However, the excavations of Pridnestrovski University in 1995-2012 near Glinoe village in Moldova discovered an interesting subculture of the Scythian appearance known as the “Tiraspol barrows” or “Tiraspol group”. The second and third stages of the functioning of burial ground, which are the most interesting for us, date back to the second half of 3<sup>rd</sup> – the third quarter of 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>18</sup>

In the Tiraspol group, in my opinion, there are three ethno-cultural components: the Scythian, Sarmato-Maeotian, Geto-Bastarnian ones. It seems that the Tiraspol barrows were erected by the Scythians whose military and political elite consists of the newcomers from the North-Western Caucasus (Siracians and/or Maeotians). Tiraspol barrows are considered Scythian also by their researchers, although the cultural components identified by them differ somewhat from those named above.<sup>19</sup> There are different points of view regarding the origin and ethnic and cultural affiliation of this group<sup>20</sup> but here the following version is proposed.

In the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE the conquerors from the North-Western Caucasus (the Siracians? Maeotians? both?)<sup>21</sup> “...ravaged a large part of Scythia, and destroying utterly all whom they subdued they turned most of the land into a desert”.<sup>22</sup> Scythia was conquered and the remnants of its population have roamed to the west. The Tiraspol group was left by the survived Scythians led by the alien nobility.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that the Saiai and Saitapharnes of the decree in honour of Protogenes were this eastern (judging by their Orient names) nobility.

The latest burials of the Tiraspol subculture are dated to the third quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. But just circa this time the Late Scythian culture of the Lower Dnieper has appeared. Some of its spectacular features have the prototypes in Tiraspol group. The main type of Scythian funeral construction of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE was the catacomb – the chamber grave consisting of the entrance pit and underground chamber of various depth. This type prevailed in the Tiraspol barrows and crypt-shape burials were the main funeral construction of Lower Dnieper Late Scythian necropolises. Having the same architectural structure (the chamber grave) Late Scythian crypts are not so deep as the Scythian catacombs due to the difference of loess – it is not as firm and stiff as in the Dniester area steppe. The Tiraspol and Lower Dnieper Scythian cultures have such specific similarities as dog burials and the presence of Thracian and La Tène pottery in the material culture.

First of all, these are the so-called “Zarubyntsi” bowls, pots decorated with relief elements and cooking

coasters – “Firedogs”. Such pottery in the Lower Dnieper ceramic complex was explained by the presence of people of Zarubyntsi culture<sup>24</sup> or Thracians<sup>25</sup> among the population of the hillforts. According to Erast Symonovich, the bearers of the Zarubyntsi culture travelled so far to the south in their desire to trade with Greek centres, and Gavrilyuk believes that the Thracians appeared here at the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE under the pressure of the Getae. She supposes that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE there was a Thracian enclave which included several settlements in the northern part of the region.<sup>26</sup>

However, such pottery and other finds of the Thracian appearance come from assemblages of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Vyazmitina, due to the imperfection of the former chronology, spoke cagily about “the last centuries BCE and the first centuries CE”.<sup>27</sup> In addition, bowls of the Zarubyntsi appearance have been found in the graves of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in Mykolaivka and Chervony Mayak (Fig. 1/1,2), and cooking coasters-“Firedogs” – on the Lyubymivka hillfort, i.e. south of the hypothetical “Thracian enclave”.<sup>28</sup>

It’s not about the enclave, which unlikely existed, and not about the Thracians, who unlikely lived in the hillforts. The absence of elements of the burial rite of these western neighbours in the Lower Dnieper necropolis leaves open the question of the physical presence of the Thracians among the Late Scythians. The Thracian ceramic standards found their way into the Late Scythian cultural complex along with their bearers – the Scythians of the Tiraspol group, for whom they were an integral part of the material culture, borrowed from their neighbours, the Getae and Bastarnae<sup>29</sup> (Figs. 1/3,4).

Noteworthy that the idea of the participation of Western population in the formation of the Lower Dnieper Late Scythian culture has already been declared.<sup>30</sup> However, the role of migrants in this hypothesis was assigned to the Geto-Dacians who had moved east under the pressure of the Gallates and Skyrae.<sup>31</sup> It seems that the bulk of migrants were Tiraspol Scythians, and the Bastarnae and Geto-Dacians acted as a catalyst for migration and “troublemakers” in the region. Just in 179-168 BCE, the Bastarnae ruled by Clondicus actively operated in the Balcanic-Carpathian lands. The “domino principle” occurred now from west to east.

Valeria Bylkova explains the western (Thracian) elements in the Lower Dnieper Late Scythian culture by its origin from the mixed Geto-Scythian culture of Dobruja<sup>32</sup> which in a certain way is consonant with my opinion.

<sup>17</sup> POLIN 1992, 33-40; GAVRILYUK 2013, 151-152.

<sup>18</sup> TEL'NOV/CHETVERIKOV/SINIKA 2012, 10; 2016, 965.

<sup>19</sup> TEL'NOV/CHETVERIKOV/SINIKA 2012, 10-12.

<sup>20</sup> YAROVOI/CHETVERIKOV 2000, 20-21; CHETVERIKOV 2002, 241.

<sup>21</sup> There are good reasons to identify them with the subculture of the burial grounds of the North-Western Caucasus such as Tenginski, Novolabinski, Sereginski, Chetuk, etc. (see BEGLOVA/ERLIKH 2018).

<sup>22</sup> DIODORUS SICULUS 2, 43, 5.

<sup>23</sup> In one paper the erection of Tiraspol barrows was quite rightly connected with the events of the 70s-60s of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE (CHETVERIKOV/SINIKA 2002, 303-304) although this conclusion lacks in the final monograph.

<sup>24</sup> SYMONOVICH 1979, 96.

<sup>25</sup> VIAZMITINA 1969, 134; GAVRILYUK 2005-2009, 138-140.

<sup>26</sup> GAVRILYUK 2005-2009, 139. It is not entirely clear why she considers these Thracians to be culturally close to the Bastarnae of Poianesti-Lukashivka culture, and why the Thracian-speaking Getae crowded out their own tribesmen.

<sup>27</sup> VIAZMITINA 1969, 123.

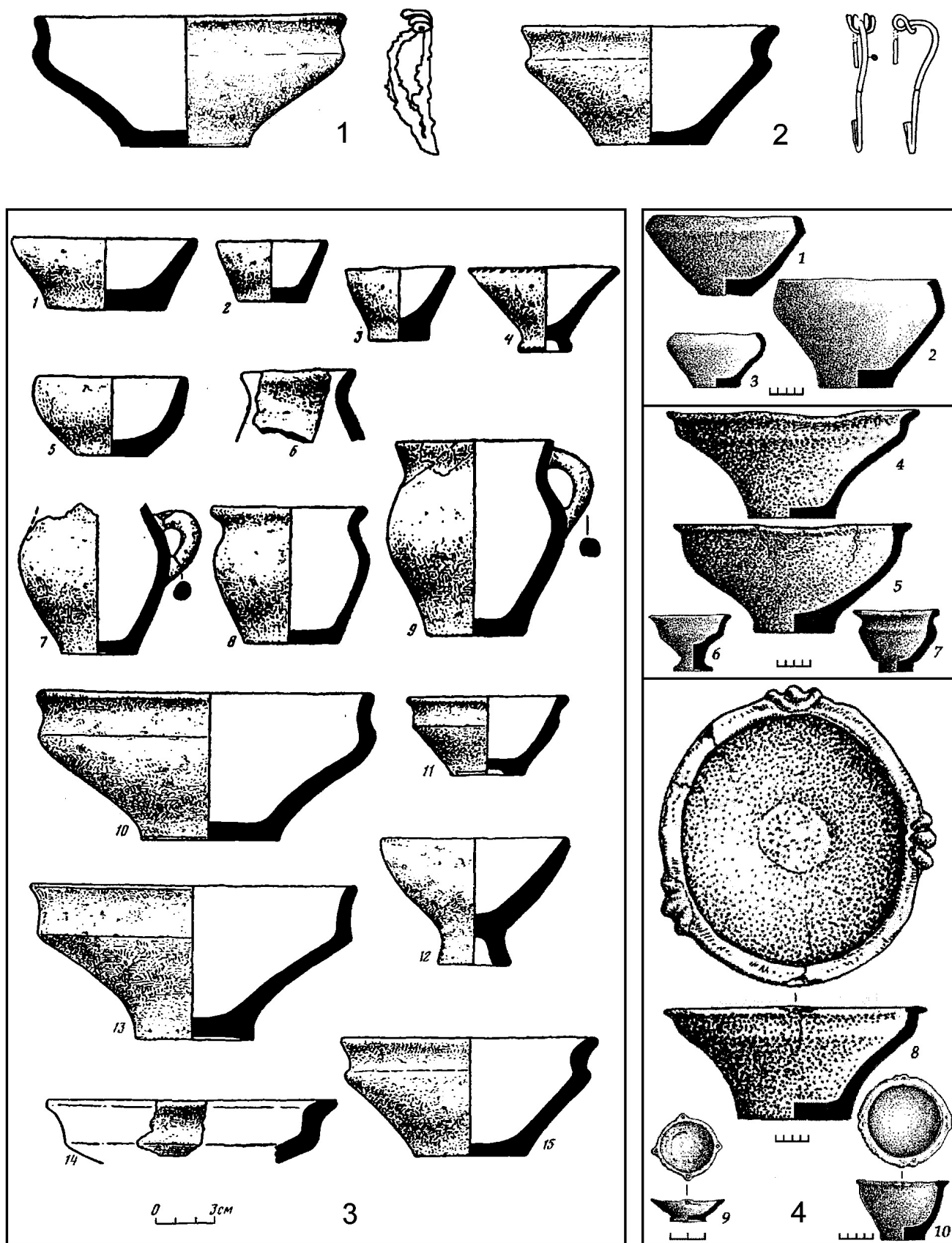
<sup>28</sup> I leave aside the issue of the presence of Thracian pottery in the Crimean Late Scythian antiquities; see VLASOV 1999, 9, 12.

<sup>29</sup> TEL'NOV/SINIKA 2012, 77, pl. 1. It is significant that bowls with ribs and moldings make up the majority of Thracian ceramics in Tiraspol barrows.

<sup>30</sup> TCACIUK 1992; TCACIUK 1994; TKACHUK 1995; BRUYAKO/TKACHUK 1994; SHCHEGLOV 1998, 151.

<sup>31</sup> TKACHUK 1999, 299.

<sup>32</sup> BYLKOVA 2010, 419.



**Fig. 1.** The pottery of Western types in the Lower Dnieper Late Scythian culture and Tiraspol' barrows. 1-2. Chervonyi Mayak; 3. Mykolaivka (after SYMONOVICH 1979); 4. Tiraspol' barrows (after TEL'NOV/SINIKA 2012).

It is look like Tiraspol Scythians, in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, moved east and reached the Dnieper River, where they have settled in the places, familiar and inhabited by their ancestors. The impetus for their moving to the east was probably the increased military and political activity of the Getae and Bastarnae. It is possible that the “eastern” Tiraspol aristocracy returned to their native lands – to the North Caucasus, and the appearance there of characteristic Late Scythian “frontlets with hook” and other Western items (all finds no older than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) reflects this migration.

Thus, it seems quite possible that, in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, the Scythian population of the Tiraspol group – who came from west – became the ethnic and cultural substratum in the development of the Lower Dnieper Late Scythian culture. This culture has incorporated many of the neighbouring elements such as La Tène (Bastarnae) and Thracian (Geto-Dacians), which are reflected in the Late Scythian cultural complex. The high similarity of the subcultures on the Lower Dnieper and Crimea (with still existing differences) does not exclude the influence of these communities upon the development of the Crimean version of the Late Scythian culture, although this is a topic for a separate study.

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