

# ON THE INTERPRETATION OF CERTAIN IMAGES ON DEER STONES

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Deer stones are one specific type among the monuments of the Eurasian steppes from the Bronze Age and Scythian periods. They are stone steles of varying dimensions, sometimes with anthropomorphic but primarily with zoomorphic representations, among which dominate stylized figures of galloping deer with long branching horns. Such monuments have frequently been the subject of study by many scholars, who have established their date and the range of territory over which they are found (Volkov 1981; Chlenova 1984; Khudiakov 1987; Savinov 1994; Varenov 1998). All the specialists have interpreted deer stones as symbolic representations of warriors and the depictions on them as tattoos or leather appliqués on warriors' clothing.

Analysis of a number of bronze objects both from museum collections and from excavations of recent years suggests yet another variant for the interpretation of such representations. Let us look first of all at a bronze plaque from a private collection (Fig. 1). The circumstances of the discovery of this plaque are unknown, but the style of the depictions connect it with



Fig. 1. Bronze plaque with zoomorphic images.  
After: Treasures 1998, p. 68, Fig. 62).

Figs. 2 & 3, details of upper and lower parts of bronze plaque in Fig. 1

Scytho-Siberian cultures. Its shape is approximately trapezoidal, it measures 31.5 x 8.5 cm, and is about 0.5 cm thick; its lower edge is rounded, while the upper and wider edge has roughly a triangular shape. On the face side of the plaque are several ornamental zones: three of them have geometric compositions and two zoomorphic subjects. The geometric compositions consist of volutes, three rows of which are in the center of the plaque and one row each on the lower and upper edges. The zoomorphic subject in the upper part of the plaque contains two figures of deer and two figures of oxen, these pairs symmetrically arranged in addorsed (back-to-back) poses (Fig. 2). On the lower part of the plaque (Fig. 3) in two rows (but



practically in direct symmetry) are scenes of predation: in each row is a feline predator, under which is depicted the head of an ungulate (a horse or kulan). Behind the feline in a row stand three raptors with long beaks. Along the long edges of the plaque and along the lower border, approximately equidistant from each other, are 37 holes, each with a diameter of 3–4 cm.

The presence of these holes led the authors of the catalog description to decide that the plaque was decoration for horse harness (probably they had in mind a browband) attached to leather (*Treasures* 1998, p. 68). However, that purpose would not have required such a large number of holes. So it is possible to propose a different function for the given plaque. It could be part of defensive armament and have served either as separate arm plates or (with the help of leather straps or sinews) have been combined with an analogous plaque or plaques to form a protective suit.

The similarity of the depictions of the deer and other animals on the given plaque with those on the deer stones is quite obvious (Fig. 4). Therefore, one can propose that the depictions, carved on these stone statues of warriors, imitate not only tattooing or leather appliqués on clothes but as well zoomorphic compositions on bronze armor.



Fig. 4. The Ivolga deer stone. After: Okladnikov 1954.

The use of such bronze armor by the peoples of the Eurasian steppes in Scythian times is well established. In archaeological monuments its parts are represented principally by bronze helmets whose traditions of manufacture and use date from the Bronze Age (Komissarov 1987; Varenov 1989). For a long time

such helmets of the Scythian period in the eastern part of the steppe belt were known only from chance finds, and in individual instances were found in plundered graves (Erdenebaatar and Khudiakov 2000; Khudiakov and Erdene-Ochir 2010; Varenov 1994; for a collection of finds in the eastern region of the steppe belt see Kang 2009). Excavations of recent years in north-eastern China not only have filled out the collection of armaments but for the first time possibly have recorded finds of armor parts in situ.

In particular, this is the case in grave No. 2 excavated in 1985 (85 NDKhA I M2) at the site of Xiaoheishigou in Ningcheng County, Inner Mongolia (Fig. 5). At the

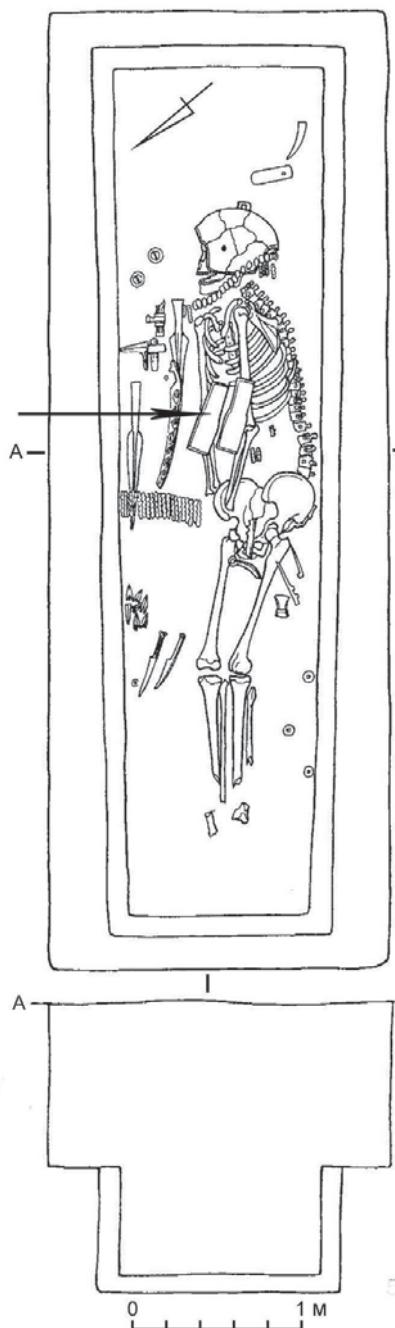


Fig. 5. Plan and section of grave 85 NDKhA I M2 at Xiaoheishigou. After: Xiaoheishigou 2009, Fig. 237.

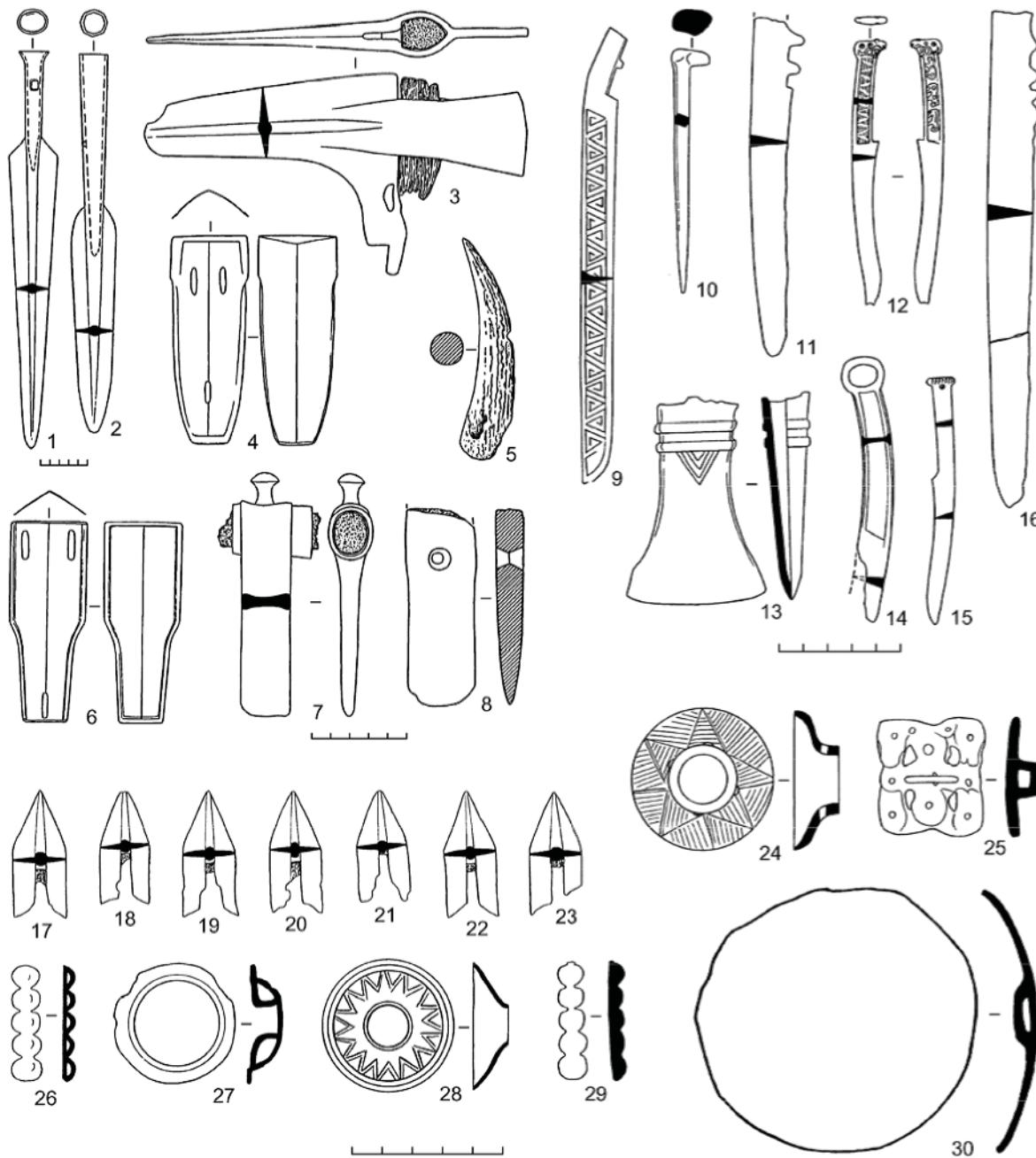
In toto six bronze helmets were found at the site, five of them outside the complex and one in grave no. 85 NDKhA I M2. That burial was in a wooden

coffin in a shallow pit with vertical walls. The male body lay on its right side, head to the southeast with extended limbs, but the foot bones were missing. On the head of the deceased was a bronze helmet with a rectangular loop at the top. The inventory included bronze weapons (spears [Fig. 6.1,2], daggers [6: 9–12, 14–16], a dagger axe with tapering blade and trapezoidal butt [6:3], a socketed axe of rectangular shape with a knob on the butt [6:7], and two-bladed arrowheads [6:17–23]), knives, awls, a small hollow axe [6:13], bronze grommets [6:24, 27, 28], belt decorations formed like a row of five beads [6:26, 29], and a square

plaque shaped from two pairs of animal heads [6:25]. Above the head of the deceased was a wedge-shaped stone object with an opening (possibly a small axe) [6:8] and a spike made from animal horn [6:5].

Of particular interest were two bronze plaques found in the vicinity of the forearm of the deceased [Figs. 5, indicated by arrow; 6:4,6; 7:1,2]. They have approximately the same size, whose determination (as also that of the measurements of the grave) in the excavation report is imprecise: on the drawing of the burial (*Xiaoheishigou 2009*, Fig. 237) the scale suggests that their length is about 45 cm, whereas in the figure depicting the inventory, the scale suggests the plaques have a length of about 11 cm (*Ibid.*, Fig. 238).

*Fig. 6. Inventory of grave 85 NDXA I M2 at Xiaoheishigou.*  
After: *Xiaoheishigou 2009*, Fig. 238.



*Fig. 7. 1, 2. Bronze plaques from grave 85 NDXA I M2 (depicted also in Fig. 6: 4, 6). 3. Bronze plaque from "grave M8501." 4. Bronze plaque from "grave M9601". After: Xiaoheishigou 2009, Figs. 238; 330:2,10.*

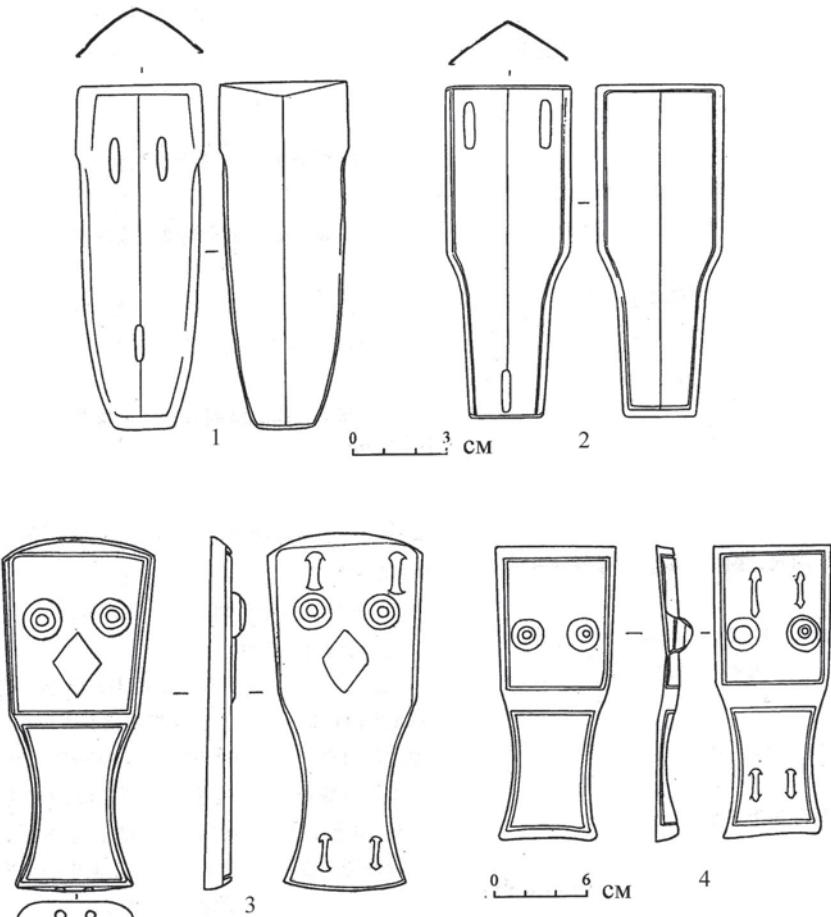
The description of the finds assigns one plaque a length of 22.1 cm, the other 11.4 cm (*Ibid.*, p. 298). Judging from the size of the grave given in the description (285 x 100 cm) the scale on the diagram should be corrected (from 1 m to 0.5 m) and thus the probable length of the plaques is 22 cm. One of the plaques has the shape of an irregular trapezoid with rounded long edges; the lower part of the other is in the shape of a rectangle with the upper part narrowing in the shape of a trapezoid. The cross-section of the plaques is triangular; on the reverse side are two loops in the upper part and one in the lower.

The authors of the excavation report describe the given objects as horse browbands, which hardly seems justified: in the inventory of burial 85 NDXA I M2 are no objects which can be connected with pieces of horse harness (whereas in other burials such are found). Taking into account the position of the plaques in situ in the vicinity of the forearms and the loops for securing them, one can suggest that such plaques could have been used as arm plates and, along with the helmet, served to defend the wearer from blows of sharp weapons.

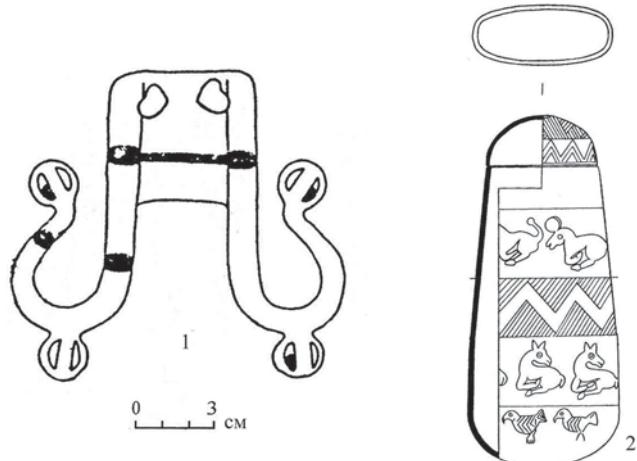
Similar in shape and possibly analogous in function are the plaques known from the site that were among the chance finds (the collection of artefacts with the provisional numbers "M8501" and "M9601") (Fig. 7:3,4). The length of one of them is 24 cm, the other 20 cm. The upper part of the plaques has the shape of a trapezoid, No. M8501 with rounded upper edge; the lower part narrows in the shape of an irregular trapezoid with concave longer sides. On the face side of the plaques in the center of the upper part are two projections; under them on plaque M8501 is also a small rhomboid-shaped projection (possibly, taken together these details represent a mask). Small loops for fastening project from the short sides on the reverse of both plaques.

*Fig. 8. Bronze objects collected at Xiaoheishigou from "grave M8061" and "grave M8501" respectively.*

After: Xiaoheishigou 2009.



Clearly grave 85 NDXA I M2 and the majority of the other burials at the Xiaoheishigou site are part of the Far Eastern extension of the Scythian world (Miniaev 1991). Attesting to this is the inventory of the graves, where there are many objects both found in burials of the Scythian period and depicted on deer stones (daggers, dagger-headed axes, axes, rein guides), and the depictions on a number of the artefacts are in the "Scytho-Siberian" style (Fig. 8).



The connection of these burials with the Upper Xiajiadian culture (to which this site is attributed) as yet remains controversial. Just as at Xiajiadian, which has defined the features of this culture, the stratum of the Xiaoheishigou site and the burials in round pits connected with it that have no inventory were cut through by burials with inventory of Scythian appearance, often in stone cists, less commonly in wooden coffins or coffins placed inside a stone cist. Thus it is clear that the phenomenon of the “culture the Upper Xiajiadian” is in need of more detailed analysis in order to avoid terminological and chronological confusion (Miniaev 1985, p. 78; 1991, p. 173). Rather it is probable that the real “culture of the Upper Xiajiadian” (both settlements and burials in pits without inventory) represents a separate culture which is not connected with the culture of burials in cists or wooden coffins with Scythian inventory.

Taking into account the currently accepted chronology of the Upper Xiajiadian – 1000–600 BCE (*Regional* 2003), the stratigraphy of the burials discussed here, and analogies of the majority of finds from the “inserted” burials at Xiaoheishigou to Scythian cultures of Inner Asia, the probable date of such burials is the second half of the Spring and Autumn period to beginning of the Warring States period, approximately the 7<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

*Note:* This article previously appeared in Russian as “K interpretatsii nekotorykh izobrazhenii na olennykh kamniakh,” in: *Kul’tury stepnoi Evrazii i ikh vzaimodeistvie s drevnimi tsivilizatsiiami: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 110-letiu so dnia rozhdeniya vydaiushchegosya rossiiskogo arkheologa Mikhaila Petrovicha Griaznova*, Kn. 1 (SPb.: IIMK RAN; Periferiia, 2012), pp. 262–67.

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