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## THE SADDLE OF THE LATE MEDIEVAL STEPPE NOMADS

### 1. Genesis of the tall saddle

For the ancient inhabitants of the Steppe, horse riding had special significance. John of Piano Carpini, the envoy sent by Pope Innocent IV to the Mongol Khan in 1245-1247, a particularly careful observer and a conscientious 'medieval reporter' writes, '... their [the Mongols'] children begin as soon as they are two or three years old to ride and manage horses and to gallop on them,... Young girls and women ride and gallop on horseback with agility like the men'<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the role played by the saddle, an everyday object remaining in common use, must have been exceptional.

Therefore, it is little wonder that both the genesis and the early stages of the development of the type of saddle which is still in widespread use today are connected with the Asian Steppe. In the famous kurgans, dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, discovered in Pazyryk in the Altai, southern Siberia, impressively ornamented sets of horse harness, including some early forms of saddles made from organic materials, were found. The leather seats placed on the horses' backs had survived thanks to the favourable climatic conditions (a perpetual cover of snow and ice). At the front and in the back of the objects, there were two bolsters-cushions filled with deer hair<sup>2</sup>. Saddles of this type were used by Steppe nomads and settlers of the Far East in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Iconography provides evidence of the fact that such saddles were used by the Scythian people. Relevant images are to be seen on, for example, a vessel from Chertomlyk, Ukraine<sup>3</sup>, and a number of gold Siberian badges from Peter I the

Great's collection. The use by the Chinese of soft saddles at the front and in the back equipped with bolsters-cushions is confirmed by the discovery of clay figures of horses in graves dating back to the time of the Han dynasty. Such miniature figures were found, for instance, in the village of Yanzyawan, Shenxi province, China<sup>4</sup>, and a number of statues the size of a real animal with carefully represented parts of horse harness and saddles are known from the famous terracotta figures of the Emperor Qui Shi Huang's guards, which were discovered near Xian, Shenxi province, China<sup>5</sup>.

At this stage of the study in question, it may be assumed that the type of saddle discussed here was most probably perfected in Central Asia or the Far East during the first centuries of the first millennium AD. The saddle was equipped with several wooden parts: two boards placed on the horse's back along its spine and two upward projecting structures, a fork and cantle, connecting the bars at the front and in the back of the seat. This structure could be further provided with a hair-filled cushion, upholstered in leather and sometimes ornamented with metal or bone plates. This was the way the so-called tall saddle came into being, whose evolution resulted in its modern forms used today.

The earliest currently known finds representing this stage of saddle development are relics coming from the present-day territory of Korea and China. The early forms of saddles with a fork and cantle are depicted on, among others, clay figures of riders found in a tomb at the village of Changsha, Central China, and dated to 302 AD<sup>6</sup>. Tall saddles are also to be seen in grave wall paintings from the territory of the North Korean

<sup>1</sup> *The Mongol Mission. Narratives and letters of the franciscan missionaries in Mongolia and China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries*, ed. Ch. Dawson, New York 1955, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> P. I. Rudenko, *Vtoroj pazyrykskij kurgan*, Leningrad 1948, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> A. I. Meljukova, M. G. Moshkova, *Kimmerijcy, skify i ich sosedi v stepi i lesostepi Vostochnoj Evropy* [in:] *Arkheologija SSSR. Stepni evropejskoj chasti SSSR v skifo-sarmatskoe vremja*, Moskva 1989, pl. 34,2.

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Kozhanov, *Snarjazhenie i odezhda voinov epochi Han (po materialam glinjanym skulptur Janchiavan)* [in:] *Drevnie kul'tury Kitaja. Paleolit, neolit i epocha metalla*, Novosibirsk 1985, fig. 6.

<sup>5</sup> A. Cotterell, *The First Emperor of China*, London 1981, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> J. Needham, *Wielkie miareczkowanie. Nauka i społeczeństwo w Chinach i na Zachodzie*, Warszawa 1984, fig. 6; P. I. Vajnshtejn, *Mir kochevnikov centra Azii*, Moskva 1991, pp. 220-221, fig. 97,1.

state of Kogurio (4<sup>th</sup> century AD), as well as on a clay vessel in the shape of a mounted man from the territory of the South Korean state of Silla (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AD)<sup>7</sup>. Besides, some remains of such saddles have been found during archaeological excavations. A complete saddle made from two boards and a still relatively low fork and cantle joined by means of leather was found near Anjan, Henan province, China. It comes from a warrior's grave dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The warrior belonged to the Sienpi peoples, who ruled over Northern China at that time<sup>8</sup>. Several impressively ornamented metal fork fittings were discovered in graves of the royal necropolis of the north Korean state of Silla. The earliest specimens date from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>9</sup>. The fittings are evidence of the fact that contemporary saddles had tall and broad forks and cantles. Their shapes are analogous to the forms of the remains of saddles found in 7<sup>th</sup>-century Avar graves in the territory of present-day Hungary, which confirms the hypothesis regarding the role played by the Avars in transferring the saddle in question from the Far East to Europe<sup>10</sup>. It may have been from the Avars that the saddle of wooden construction with tall forks and cantles was adopted by the settlers of Europe, as evidenced by the remains of such saddles unearthed in the territory inhabited by Germanic and Slavic peoples at that time<sup>11</sup>.

In the Early Middle Ages, saddles with a wooden frame made of two bars placed on the horse's back, and a fork and cantle, holding the bars together, were in widespread use among nomadic peoples of the Steppe. Chinese, clay figures representing saddled horses of Turkish invaders, dated to the time of the Tang dynasty, as well as remains of saddles used by nomads unearthed during archaeological excavations seem to confirm the above hypothesis. A relatively large number of documented, wooden remains of early medieval saddles made of easily destroyed organic materials prove that

this part of horse harness was in common use at that time. The majority of the finds of early medieval Avar and Hungarian saddles come from the territory of present-day Hungary, which undoubtedly seems to be a result of the intensity of archaeological works conducted in this country<sup>12</sup>. The number of known finds of saddles used by nomadic tribes living in the Eastern Eurasian Steppe<sup>13</sup> is relatively smaller, probably due to the fact that this territory has not been thoroughly excavated yet. Despite some differences in the secondary formal features, the early medieval relics discovered in Hungary and the Eurasian Steppe are all saddles of the same type, made following one common idea. They are equipped with a broad fork and cantle, sometimes decorated with metal fittings or encrusted with bone. The fork is usually higher and placed vertically and the cantle slants backwards. These characteristics had survived in nomadic saddles of the Late Middle Ages.

## 2. Form and construction

The saddles of late medieval Steppe peoples were objects of stiff construction. John of Piano Carpini writes that whenever they wanted to cross a river, they used to fill a leather pouch with their clothes and 'on top of these, in the middle, they put their saddles and other hard things'<sup>14</sup>. Archaeological finds provide information about the form and construction of contemporary saddles as in the Steppe, saddles used to be placed in burials

<sup>12</sup> G. László, *Der Grabfund von Koronco und der althungarische Sattel*, "Archaeologia Hungarica", vol. XXVII, 1943. L. Révész, *Honfoglalás kori nyeregmaradványok Karosról*, "A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve", Miskolc 1963, vol. XXX-XXXI, pp. 105-124; E. H. Tóth, *The Equestrian grave of Izsák-Balázspuszta from the Magyar Conquest*, "Cumania", vol. 4, 1976, pp. 141-173; A. Kiss, *Archäologische Angaben zur Geschichte der Sättel des Frühmittelalters*, "Alba Regia", 1984, XXI, p. 189-207.

<sup>13</sup> A. A. Gavrilova, *Mogil'nik Kudyrga kak istochnik po istorii altajskikh plemen*, Moskva 1965; P. I. Vajnsh-tejn, *Pamjatniki vtoroj poloviny I tysjacheletija v Zapadnoj Tuve*, "Trudy Tuvinskoj kompleksnoj ekspedicii AN SSSR", Moskva - Leningrad 1966, vol. 2, pp. 292-347; A. P. Runich, *O konskoj sbroe iz rajona Pjatigorja*, "Sovetskaja Arkheologija", 1973, no 1, p. 165; A. K. Ambroz, *Stremena i sedla rannego srednevekovja kak chronologičeskij pokazatel (IV-VIII v.)*, "Sovetskaja Arkheologija", 1973, no 4, pp. 81-98; D. G. Savinov, *Iz istorii ubranstva verchovogo konja u narodov Juzhnoj Sibiri (II tysjacheletie n. e.)*, "Sovetskaja Etnografija", 1977, no 1, pp. 31-48; Ju. P. Khudjakov, *Kyrgyzy na Tabate*, Novosibirsk 1982, pp. 124-129, fig. 81, 84, 102-103; I. L. Kyzlasov, *Askizskaja kultura Juzhnoj Sibiri X-XIV vv.* [in:] *Arkheologija SSSR. Svod Arkheologičeskich Istočnikov*, Moskva 1983, p. 37, fig. 18.

<sup>14</sup> The Mongol Mission ..., p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, fig. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem pp. 220-221, fig. 98,2.

<sup>9</sup> A. Ito, *Zur Chronologie der frühsillazeitlichen Gräber in Südkorea*, München, 1971, fig. 57.

<sup>10</sup> W. Świętosławski, *Die Elemente der fernöstlichen Bewaffnung im frühmittelalterlichen West- und Mitteleuropa* [in:] *Actes du XIIe Congres International des Sciences Pré-historiques et Protohistoriques*, Bratislava, 1-7 Septembre 1991, Bratislava, 1993, vol. 4, pp. 282-284.

<sup>11</sup> W. Janssen, *Die Sattelbeschläge aus Grab 446 des fränkischen Gräberfeldes von Wesel-Bislich, Kreis Wesel*, "Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt", 1981, vol. 11, no 2, pp. 149-169; V. Schmidt, *Lieps. Ein slawische Siedlungskammer am Süden des Tollensesees*, Berlin, 1984; *Les habitats du lac de Paladru (Isere) dans leur environnement. La formation d'un terroir au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle sous la direction de Michel Colardelle et Eric Verdel*, Paris 1993, fig. 183-184.

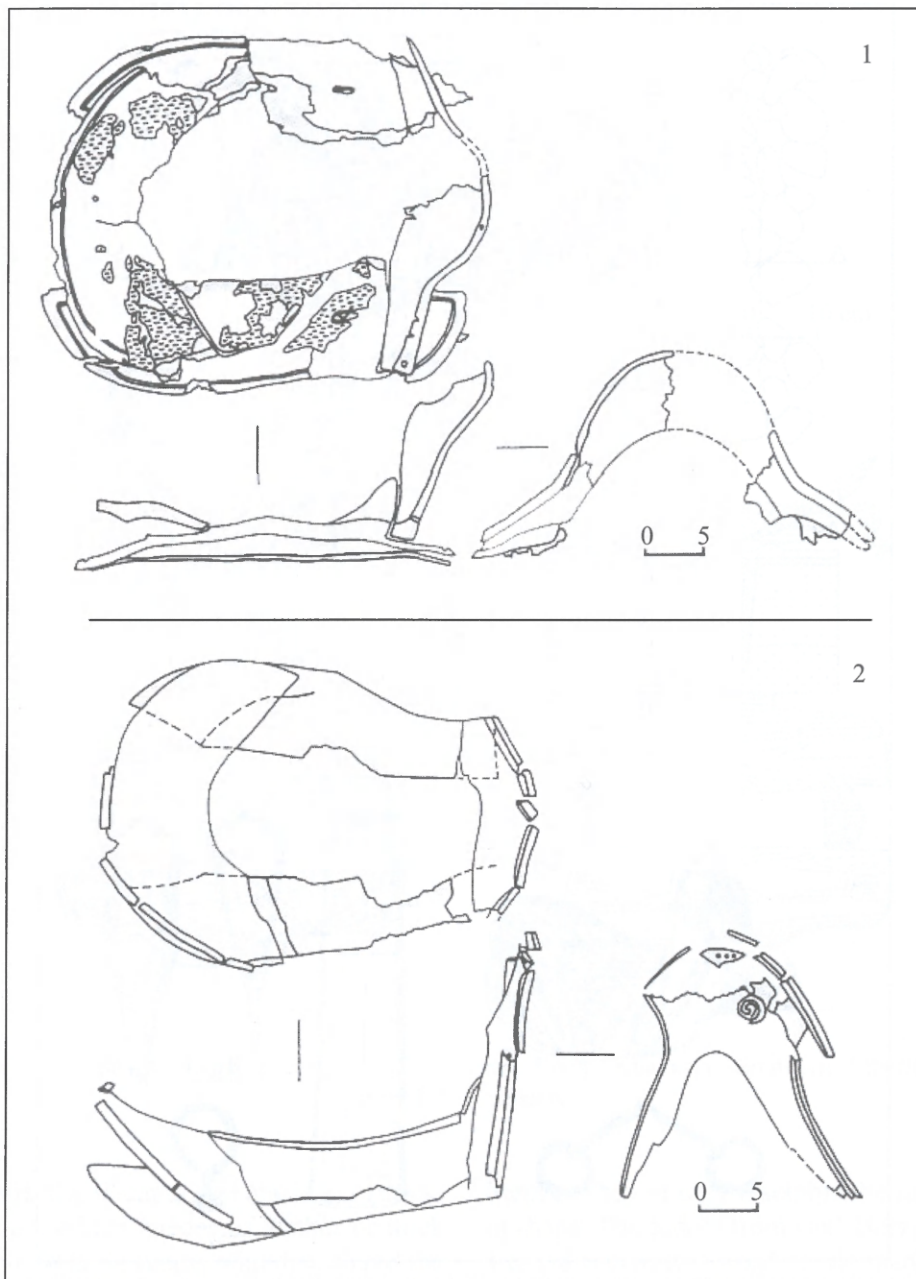


Fig. 1. Remains of the saddles from Smeloe (1), Prishiba (2), Ukraine; after M. L. Shvecov.

as part of grave goods<sup>15</sup>. During archaeological excavations of late medieval nomadic burials, some saddle remains have been unearthed. These are mostly metal or bone decorations originally attached to saddles and less often their wooden constructional parts. Being a source of knowledge about their original shapes and construction, the latter play a particularly important role in the study of old nomadic saddles.

The basic part of late medieval nomadic saddles was a wooden structure made from two boards, called bars, running parallel and held together by the fork at

the front and cantle in the back. Other parts, such as leather or textile upholstery or bone and metal decorative fittings, were optional.

The especially important examples of wooden and bone saddle parts are finds from the villages of Smeloe and Prishib, situated in present-day Ukraine, about 3 km away from each other. Remains of two saddles were unearthed in a male (Smeloe) and female (Prishib) graves, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries and associated with Polowce (Fig. 1)<sup>16</sup>. It should be noted that the finds

<sup>15</sup> E. V. Kovychev, *Istorija Zabajkal'ja (I-ser. II tys. n.e.)*, Irkutsk 1984, p. 50, fig. 16.

<sup>16</sup> M. L. Shvecov, *Pozdnekochevničeskoe pogrebenie u s. Smeloe na Severskom Donce*, "Sovetskaja Arkheologija", 1984, no 1, pp. 264-271.

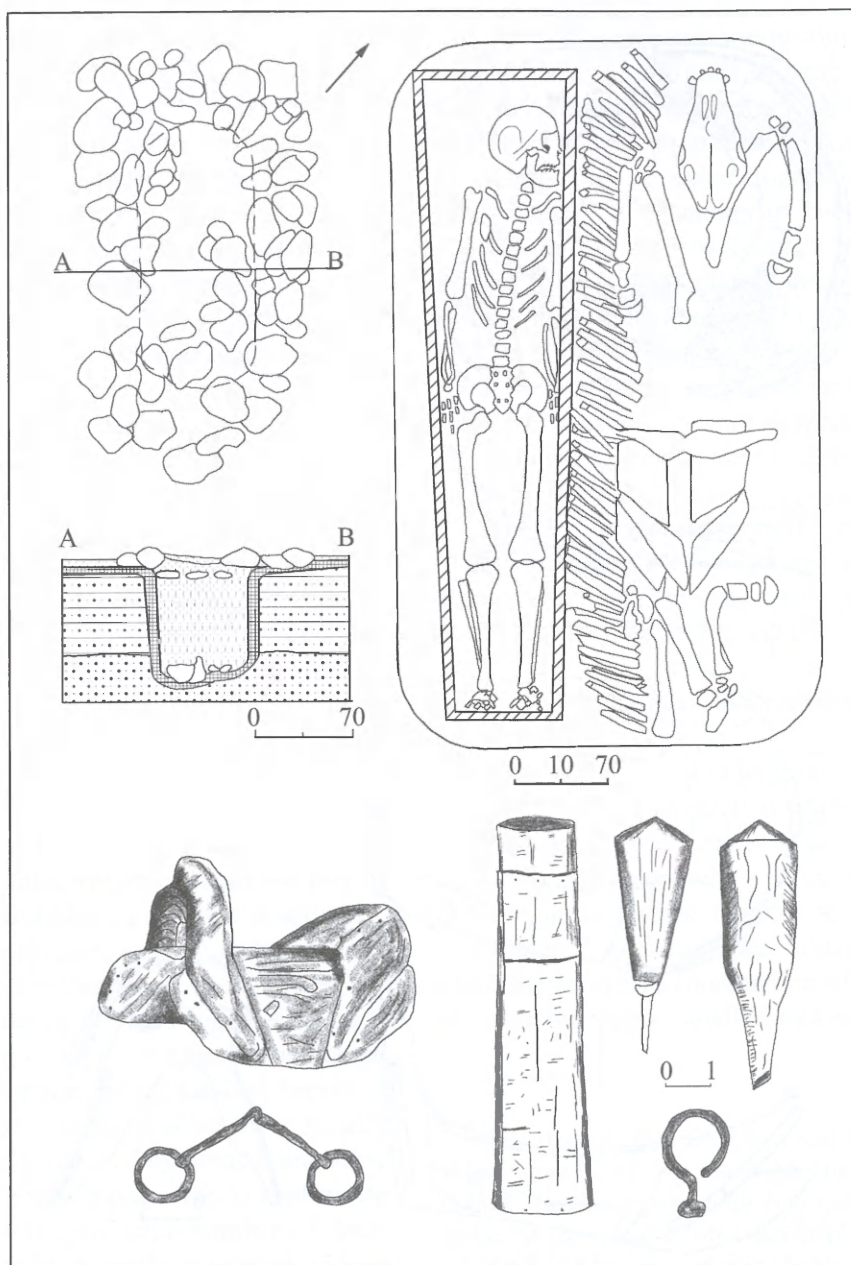


Fig. 2. Plan of a grave with grave goods from Ust'-Borya, Transbaikalia; after E. V. Kovychev.

were in a very good state of preservation, particularly the specimen from Smeloe. Both relics have broad cantles, placed at a very small angle. Their forks are taller and placed almost vertically, slightly slanting toward the front. The cantles of the saddles from the burials at Smeloe and Prishib are very similar in size and fan-shaped. The forks, on the other hand, differ in shape. The specimen from Smeloe is relatively wide, though much narrower than the cantle. Its upper part is semi-circular with narrow, side protuberances for joining it to the bars. By contrast, the fork of the saddle from Proshib is narrower, taller and slimmer, rounded at the top with side indentations.

The wooden parts of the saddle from Smeloe are made from boards 3-5 cm thick. The fork is 12 cm high

and 21 cm wide, and the cantle is approximately 9 cm in height and 29 cm in width. Both the fork and cantle are made from single pieces of wood. On the wooden part, there are minute traces of leather upholstery, fixed by means of tiny bone nails and ornamental bone plates. The saddle did not have any metal parts. Several openings, 0.5 cm in diameter, used for passing the leather straps, can be seen in the preserved wooden parts. This would suggest that the particular hard parts of the saddle were joined together so as to form one elastic whole. In the case of the remains of the saddle from Smeloe, besides the basic wooden parts, that is the two bars, the fork and the cantle, other, so far unknown, components of the wooden structure were also found. These were two narrow boards lying under the bars. They were almost

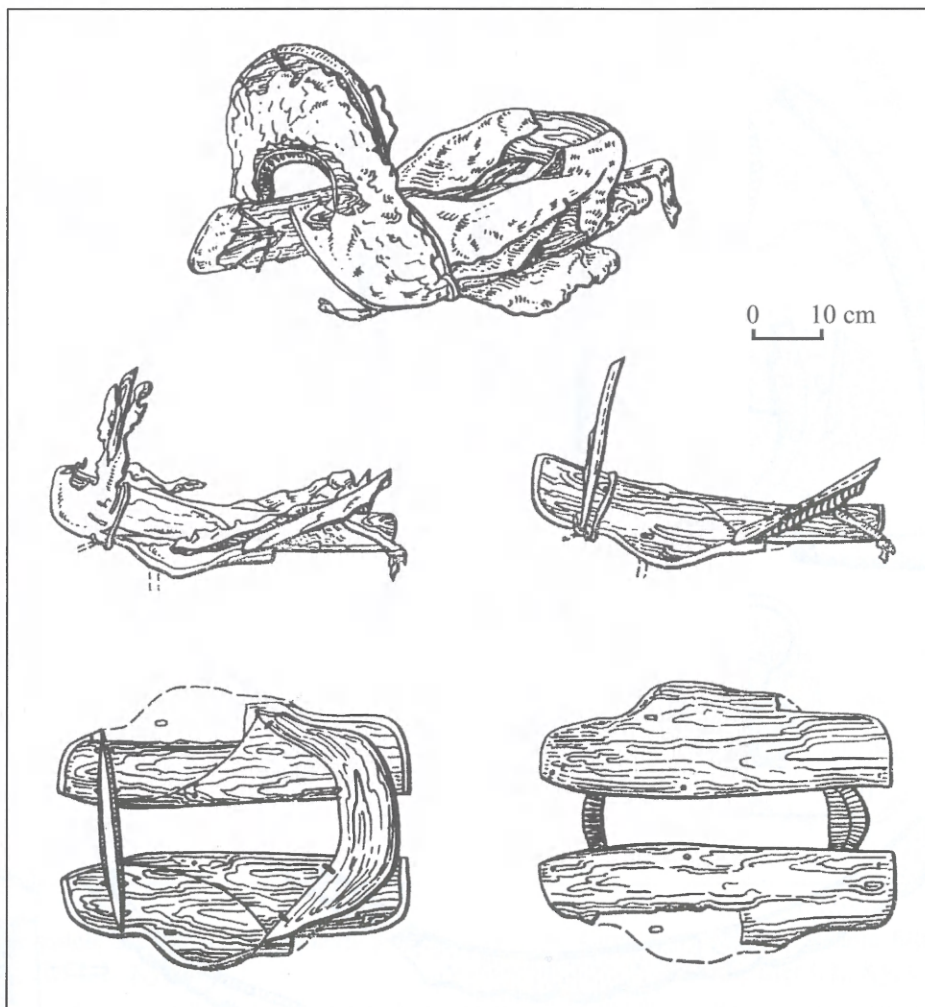


Fig. 3. Saddle from a cave of Uzun Chay Rock, Khakasia, Southern Siberia; after I. L. Kyzlasov.

rectangular in shape, 8 x 38 cm in size and 0.5 cm thick. Between them and the bars, pieces of leather or thick felt were identified. M.L. Shvecov, who discovered the boards, interprets them as a 'frame'. Lack of any analogues makes it impossible to determine the function of this 'frame'. It should rather be argued that in the case of this saddle, the bars were not of homogenous but foliated construction, which may have prevented the horse's sweat from permeating through the saddle. It is known that in order to avoid this, the underside of saddles used to be overlaid with birch bark. Here, the method consisted in using an additional layer of leather or thick felt and a narrow wooden board.

Some wooden components of nomadic saddles in a good state of preservation were also found in the Asian Steppe, namely Central Asia and Transbaikalia (the area east of Lake Baikal). Regrettably, the Transbaikalian finds, associated with the Ancient Nomads, are known only from several imprecise publications. Their representations, however, prove that saddles with wooden parts: two bars, a fork and a cantle, were also used in the Middle Ages at the eastern extremities of the

Steppe. They closely resemble the saddle from Smeloe in shape. The saddle from Ust'-Borzja on the Onon has a broad fork and a broad cantle made from two pieces of wood connected in the middle. The fork is placed vertically in relation to the bars and the cantle slants backward at an acute angle (Fig. 2)<sup>17</sup>.

The well preserved, wooden saddle discovered in Uzun Chay, Chakhasia, (Fig. 3)<sup>18</sup> is identical in shape and similarly constructed. Its fork is vertical and the cantle clearly slants backward. In addition, the bars are similar in form. In the case of this find also remains of a leather seat, made of ship skin, have survived<sup>19</sup>.

Besides the wooden parts of saddles which have survived in the late medieval Steppe, a relatively numerous collection of ornamental details from non-existing

<sup>17</sup> E.V. Kovychev, *Istorija Zabajkal'ja ...*, fig. 15, 16.

<sup>18</sup> I. L. Kyzlasov, *Askizskaja kultura Juzhnoj Sibiri X-XIV vv.* [in:] *Arkheologija SSSR. Svod Arkheologicheskikh Istochnikov*, Moskva 1983, fig. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

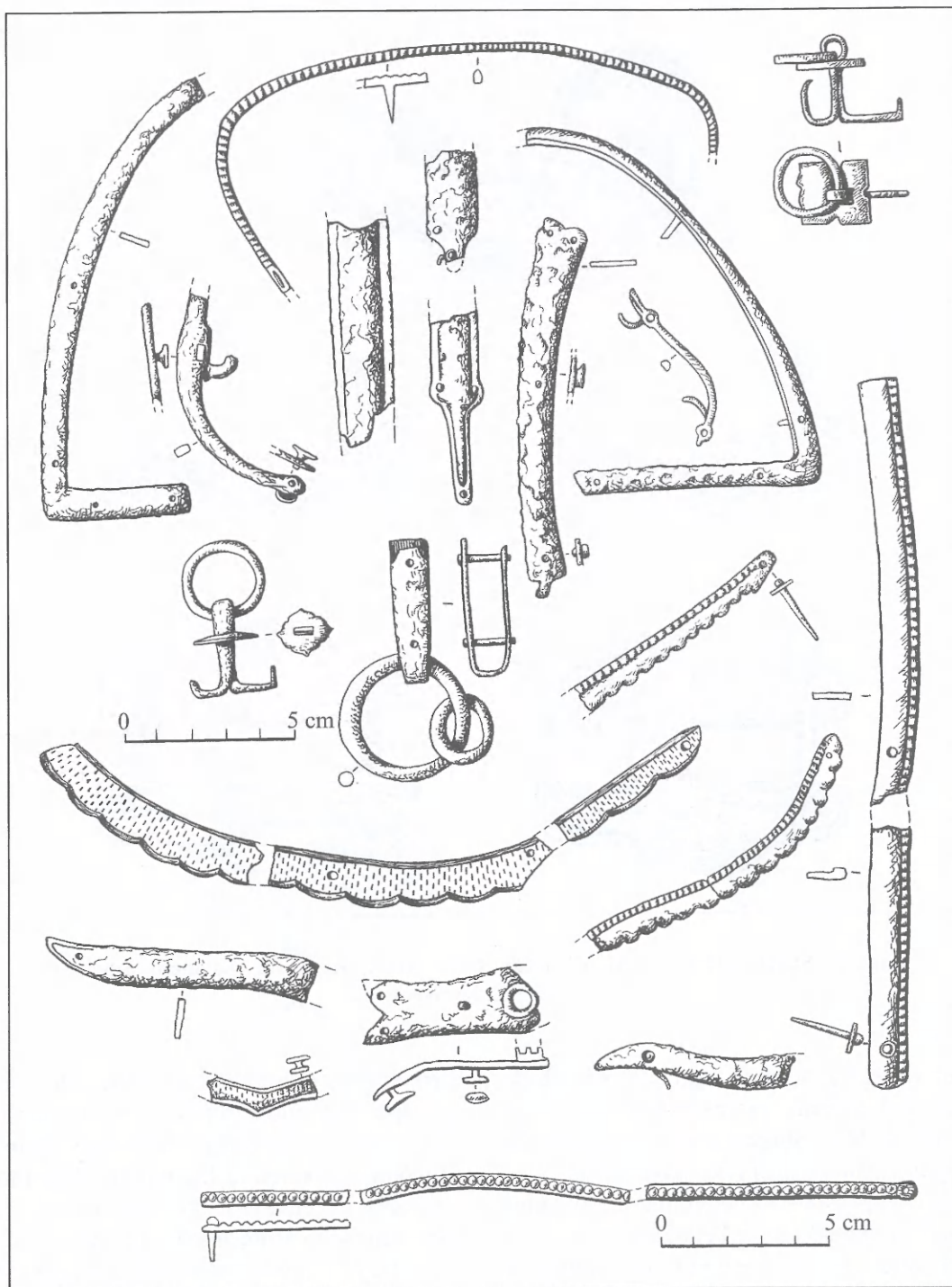


Fig. 4. Saddle fittings from Southern Siberia; after I. L. Kyzlasov.

saddles have been discovered. These are mostly bone or metal plates or borders attached to the surface or edges of the fork or cantle. Such finds provide information about the shape of the saddles to which they were originally fastened. The finds are relatively numerous. Among such specimens, bone plates are characteristic of the Eurasian Steppe and the majority of metal fittings come from the South-Siberian Steppe (Fig. 4-6).

Ornamental, bone parts of saddles were found, among others, in graves dated to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, associated with the Black Klobuks, in Zelenki (Fig. 7)

and Kamenka (Fig. 8), the territory of present-day Ukraine<sup>20</sup>. In both cases, the pieces of cladding found are so numerous that they allow of the reconstruction of entire saddles. The saddle discovered in kurgan 428 in Kamenka was also typical in construction, as evidenced by the plates found in this grave. Both the fork and the cantle were broad and rounded in the upper

<sup>20</sup> P. A. Pletneva, *Drevnosti chernych klobukov ...*, pl. 7, 14, 35.

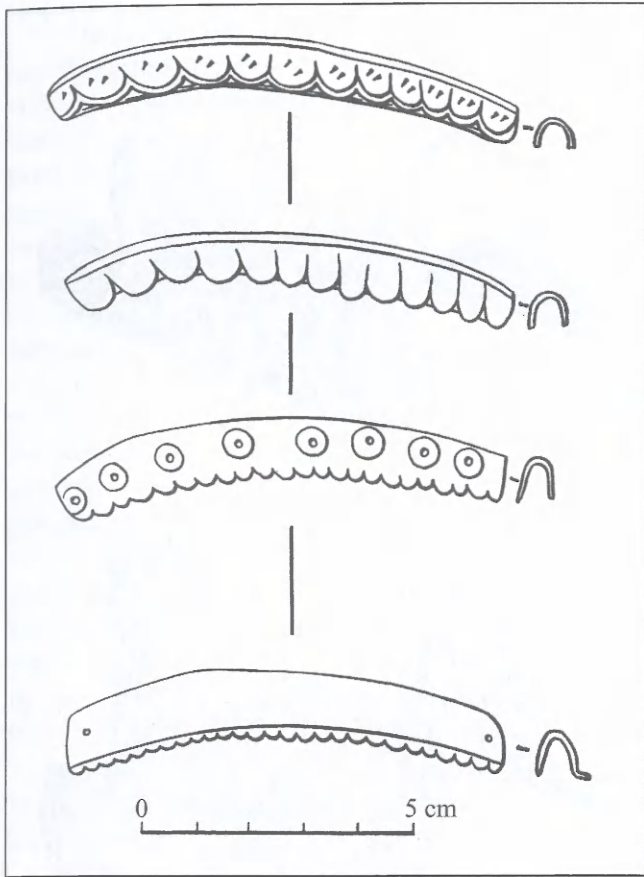


Fig. 5. Typology of saddle fittings from Southern Siberia; after I. L. Kyzlasov.

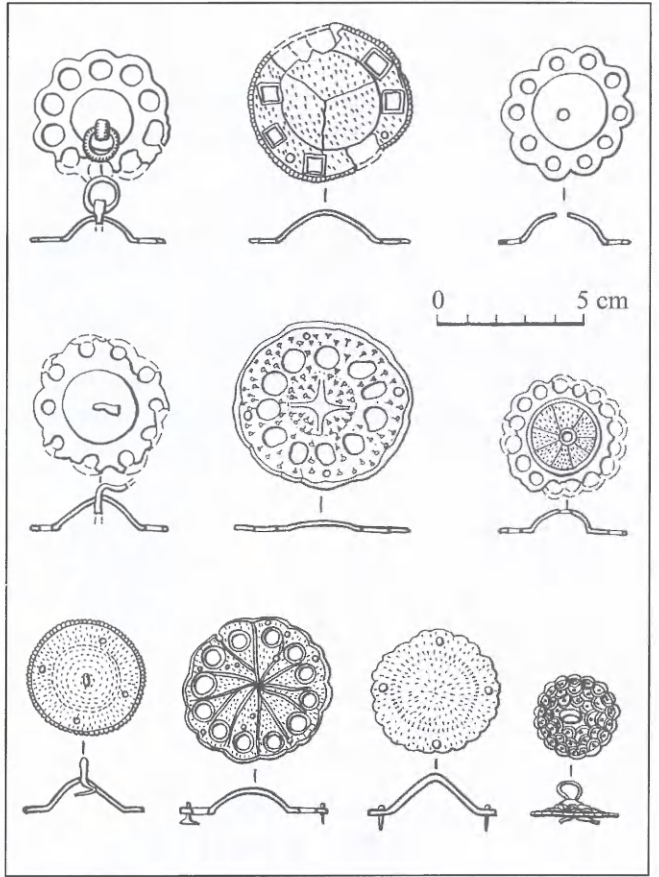


Fig. 6. Circular and rosette saddle fittings from Southern Siberia; after I. L. Kyzlasov.

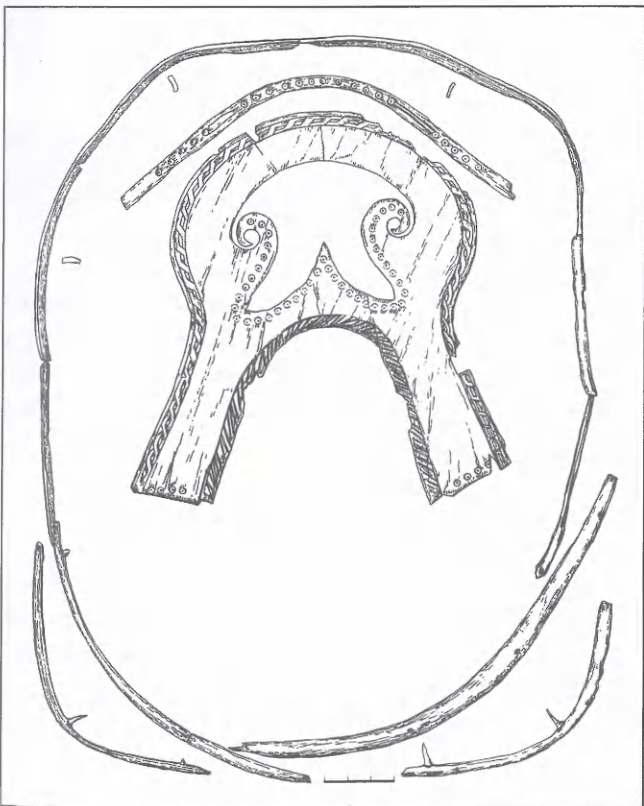


Fig. 7. Bone fittings of the saddle from Zelenki, Ukraine; after S. A. Pletneva.

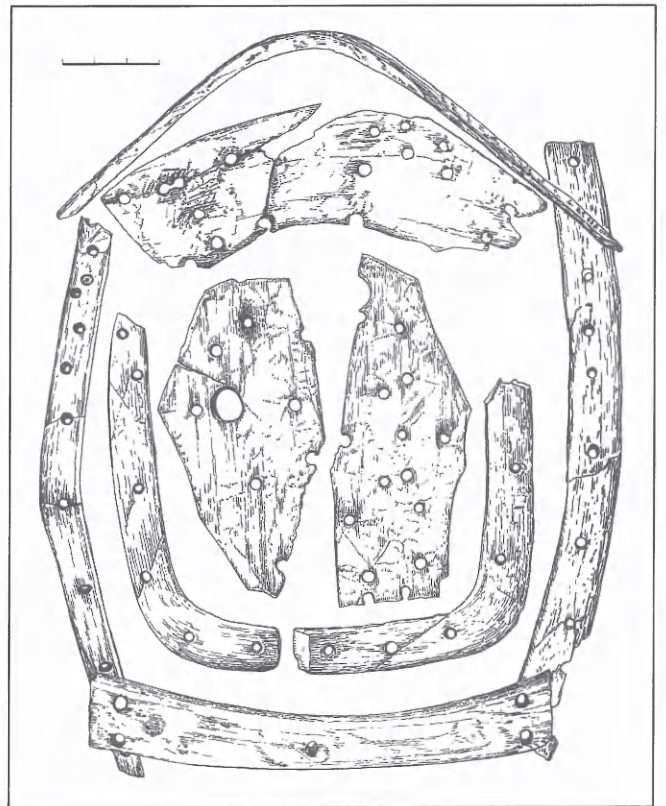


Fig. 8. Bone fittings of the saddle from Kamenka, Ukraine; after S. A. Pletneva.

section. They were attached to a pair of bars with bone plates along the edge. The numerous openings preserved in the saddle suggest that the particular parts of the seat were fastened together by means of leather straps, like in the case of the above-discussed saddle from Smeloe<sup>21</sup>.

The bone components of a saddle discovered in kurgan 303 in Zelenki differ in form. This plate ornament of the fork is rounded in the upper part, with side indentations and a fantastically shaped opening in the middle. The edges of the plate are decorated with engraved circles and pseudo-braid. Probably, the fork of the saddle placed in this burial mound was similar in form to the above-discussed specimen from Prishiba. The other bone parts of the saddle from burial 303 in Zelenki are narrow, bone borders with small bone nails. They were originally placed along the edges of the cantle and bars<sup>22</sup>.

Discussing late medieval saddle of the Steppe nomads, it should be noted that the basic constructional components, the shape of the bars, the fork and the cantle had survived to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the handicraft of some peoples of Central Asia. Two saddles of South-Siberian Tartars from the collection of the Museum of Archeology and Ethnography of the National University of Omsk may serve as examples here<sup>23</sup>. They are instances of two types of saddle equipped with a broad and narrow fork and cantle and used in the Late Middle Ages. The saddletree of one of the saddles was made of birch wood and its particular parts joined together with thick iron nails (Fig. 9, 1)<sup>24</sup>. So far, there has been no evidence of such a way of connecting the fork and cantle to the bars in the case of late medieval specimens. The other saddle was made from wooden boards fastened together by means of a technique typical of medieval objects: they were tied with leather straps passing through special openings bored in the components of the saddletree (Fig. IX, 2)<sup>25</sup>. In the central part of the saddle, a round cushion made from thick, black cotton fabric was placed. It was filled with thick felt and attached to the wooden parts with small iron nails. The side surfaces, the bars included, were covered with square pieces of tanned skins, stamped with a geometrical design. The visible wooden components, for example, the ends of the bars, as well as the outer surfaces were decorated

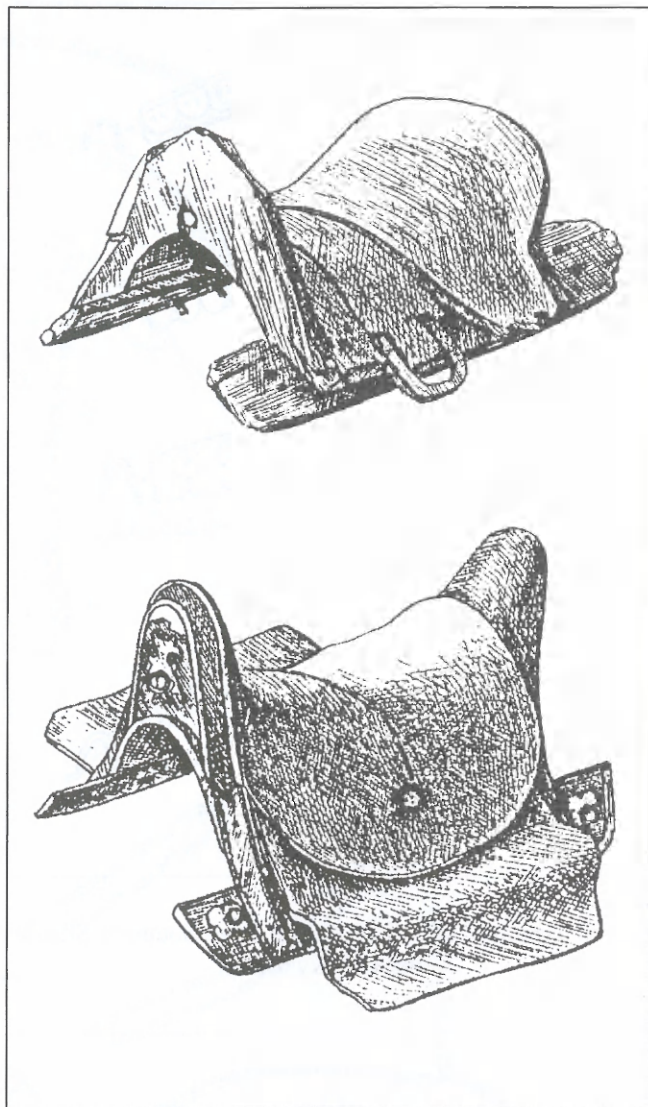


Fig. 9. Saddles of Siberian Tartars, beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; after *Khazaystvo i sredstva peredvizeniya sibirskikh tatarov*.

with copper knobs with star-like ornamentation and pieces of green leather. On the outside of the fork, a copper plate covered with a floral pattern was added. The insides of both the fork and the cantle were painted light red.

### 3. Ornamentation

One of the manifestations of the significance ancient nomads attached to horse harness, including the saddle, was the common use of impressive ornamentation. John of Piano Carpini writes, 'There were many of them who had, as far as I could judge, about twenty marks' worth of gold on their bits, breastplates, saddles and cruppers'<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, pl. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pl. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Chozajstvo i sredstva peredvizheniya sibirskikh tatar v kollekcijach Muzeja arkheologii i etnografii OmGU*, Novosibirsk 1999, pp. 212-213, pl. XXX, 5, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 212, pl. XXX, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, pp. 213-214, pl. XXX, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *The Mongol Mission ...*, p. 62.



Among the archaeological finds of saddles coming from the territory of the Steppe are numerous specimens with traces of decoration in the form of bone or metal plates covering the wooden parts, particularly the forks. This is evidence of the fact that contemporary nomads considered the appearance of horse harness as very important. This attitude seems to have survived to our times and has been noticed by ethnographers studying the nineteenth-twentieth century material culture of Steppe peoples<sup>27</sup>.

The above-discussed wooden fork and cantle of the saddle from Prishiba were impressively decorated with bone cladding. The bone plates covering the outer surface of the fork were decorated with ornamental designs in the form of circles, spirals, and pseudo-braid. On the other hand, the outside of the cantle was covered only with plain plates. The edges of both the fork and the cantle were clad with narrow, ornamented plates<sup>28</sup>. The shape and ornamentation of the fork and its decorative bone plates are analogues of the finds from Zelenki.

The ornamentation of the saddle from Smeloe was less splendid. The edge of the fork had bone cladding fastened with small bone nails<sup>29</sup>.

Large fragments of bone cladding of 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century saddles were found, among others, in the kurgans in the villages of Zelenki and Kamenka, Ukraine<sup>30</sup>. The original shape of the fork of the saddle from Zelenki can be reconstructed thanks to a big bone plate with a fantastic indentation and engraved ornamentation unearthed in the burial.

Exceptionally impressive metal fork and cantle cladding was discovered in a grave in the village of Terpenie, near Melitopol, southern Ukraine, in 1845. The find was dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig. 10)<sup>31</sup>. The plates, made of gilded silver, are stamped with a rich floral and animal design. The fittings of the fork, 22.5 cm wide and 22.5 cm in maximal height, are decorated with figures of two horses as well as other patterns. The plate originally placed on the cantle is 27.5 cm wide and 18.5 cm in maximal height.

<sup>27</sup> L. R. Pavlinskaja, *Khudozhestvennyj metall v snarjazhenii vsadnika i konja u narodov Sibiri XIX - nachala XX vv. Stanovlenie i razvitie remeslennoj tradicii* [in:] *Pamjatniki material'noj kul'tury narodov Sibiri*, Sankt Peterburg 1994, pp. 52-75, fig. 5-7.

<sup>28</sup> M. L. Shvecov, *Pozdnekochevnicheskoe ...*, p. 270, fig. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>30</sup> P. A. Pletneva, *Drevnosti chernych klobukov ...*, pl. 7 i 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Altyn urda hezinelere. Sokrovishcha Zolotoj Ordy. The Treasures of the Golden Horde*, Sankt Peterburg 2000, pp. 61, 215-216.

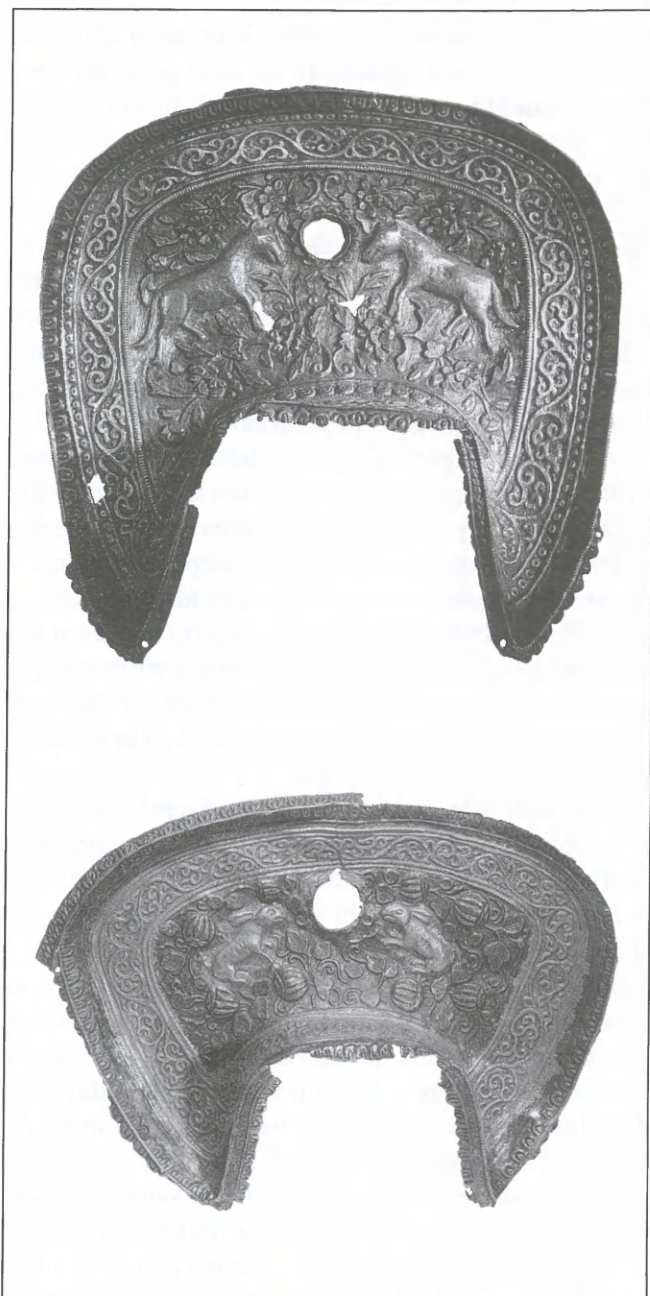


Fig. 10. Gilded saddle fittings from a grave in Terpena, Ukraine; after Sokrovishcha Zolotoj Ordi.

The representations of two hares visible on the plate are depicted among folded lotus flowers<sup>32</sup>. Similar, but fragmentarily preserved, saddle fittings were also discovered in a 13<sup>th</sup> century grave of a nomad located near Kremenchuga, in the Middle Dnieper region, Ukraine<sup>33</sup>. Judging by the surviving fragments, the original fittings, one or two pieces, were semicircular

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>33</sup> Ja. I. Smirnov, *Atlas drevnej serebrjanaj i zolotoj posudy vostochnogo proischozhenija najdennoj preimushchestvenno v predelach Rossijskoj imperii*, Sankt Peterburg 1909, pl. XCVIII, fig. 35.

in shape. They were made from sheet metal and fully covered with geometrical, floral and probably animal designs (Fig. 11).

#### 4. Symbolic and customary aspects

The saddle, which in the Steppe society was in fact an everyday object, began to be associated with a number of meanings understood in the customary sphere of Steppe peoples. Information confirming the above assumption is to be found in accounts written by both native and foreign authors.

The symbolic functions of the saddle were connected with numerous moments from the everyday life of contemporary nomads. They were related to the position of particular nomads in the Steppe community, the system of punishments as well as funeral rites.

The *Secret History of the Mongols* (1240?), a native source of considerable importance, written in the Mongol environment, provides relevant information. Regrettably, the chronicle has not survived in its latter, Chinese version.

Several mentions found in the *Secret History of the Mongols* refer to mutual relationships between individual members of the Steppe community. The symbolic phrase 'Let him saddle the horse and open the door' was used by one of the subjects of young Temuchin on presenting the ruler with his boy as a servant<sup>34</sup>. Undoubtedly, the incident is evidence of the presence in the medieval nomadic community of persons serving their superiors in everyday life. Besides, it seems to confirm the assumption that saddling the horse was a symbol of servitude.

The saddle could also become a symbol of disgrace. The *Secret History of the Mongols* says that Genghis Khan 'beat Sokor, the envoy, put a saddle on his back and sent him back home on foot' It may only be noted that this act was not so much aimed at humiliating the envoy himself as the person who had sent him<sup>35</sup>.

Taking the saddle away from a person was a form of punishment introduced by Genghis Khan. According to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, by order of the ruler a person who would inquire about the number of the guards was to be 'taken their horse, saddle and bridle as well as all the garments away'<sup>36</sup>.

Information about the prophetic role of the saddle can also be found in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. One day Temuchin saw that 'the saddle came loose

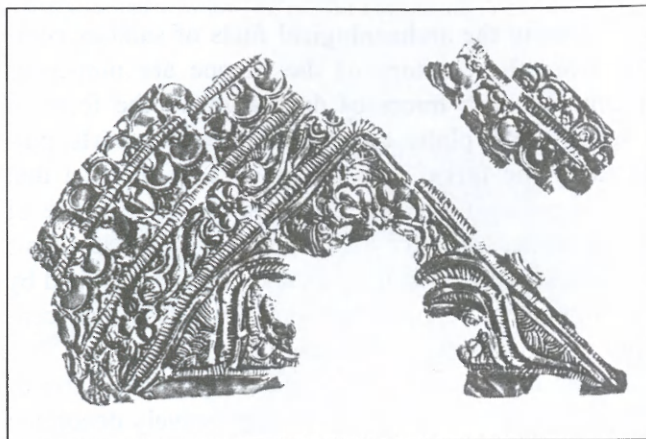


Fig. 11. Fragments of the fork fittings of a saddle from a grave in Kremenchug, Ukraine; after Ya. I. Smirnov.

and fell off [the horse's back] although the girth and the strap on the horse's chest were not undone.' For the ruler of all the Mongols the situation was clear, 'Does Heaven want to warn me?... and he turned his horse back'<sup>37</sup>.

A common element of funeral rites performed by inhabitants of the medieval Steppe was placing, among other things, parts of horse harness, the saddle included, in the grave of a dead person. Numerous burial finds of such objects discovered in practically the entire territory of the ancient Steppe seem to confirm this assumption. A written mention referring to the presence of this custom among 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongols can be found in the accounts by C. de Bridia, one of the companions of Carpini while they were acting as the Pope's envoys to the Khan of the Mongols in the years 1245-1247, and John of Piano Carpini himself. The latter writes, 'When he is dead, if he is one of the less important men, he is buried in secret in the open country wherever it seems good to them. He is buried with one of his dwellings, sitting in the middle of it, and they place a table in front of him, and a dish filled with meat and a goblet of mare's milk. And they bury with him a mare and her foal and a horse with bridle and saddle...'<sup>38</sup>.

The custom of placing saddles in graves is visible in numerous burials of late medieval nomads. The important thing is that instances of such burials are to be found in different, sometimes remote, regions of the contemporary Steppe, which is evidence of the fact that the custom was a common and widely known phenomenon. The saddle was usually placed on the horse, buried next to the rider, or on some symbolic

<sup>34</sup> *The Secret History of the Mongols*, ed. F. Woodman Cleaves, London 1982, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> *The Mongol Mission ...*, p. 12-13.

fragments of the animal's skeleton, originally parts of the horse's body. The horse skeleton was placed on either the left (Smeloe)<sup>39</sup> or the right (Ust'-Borzja, Eastern Transbaikalia)<sup>40</sup> side of the buried person. Probably, the custom of burying people with their horses did not determine the side on which the animal was to be laid. Undoubtedly, as it was supposed to serve its owner after death, it had to be equipped with all the harness components, including the saddle. Also, the presence of the saddle in a grave may have been connected with the personal wealth of the person and their family.

### 5. Concluding remarks

The above remarks prove that there were basically two types of saddle used by late medieval nomads of the Steppe. The main difference lied in the width of the fork and the cantle. They were clearly related to the earlier, early medieval nomadic saddles. The fact that late medieval forms of saddles have survived to our times practically unchanged is evidence of their splendid functional properties. They must have been comfortable and suitable for long expeditions, typical of nomadic lifestyle. Moreover they allowed efficient realization of war goals. Authors dealing with military science and issues connected with arms and armour frequently emphasize that it was the saddle that made

it possible for the rider to shoot arrows backwards and to successfully strike blows with a saber and spear<sup>41</sup>. Also, many of them are of the opinion that the saddles of medieval Steppe peoples served as prototypes for several types of European saddle, including the so-called knightly tall saddle, without which the history of knightly arms and armour would have taken a different course.

Despite the commonly stressed unusual functional aspects of nomadic Steppe saddles, they did sometimes fail and prove to be inconvenient in some situations. In the section of his account dealing with the most effective and successful ways of fighting the Turks, John of Piano Carpini suggests that the warriors are armed with '... lances with a hook to drag the Tartar from their saddle, for they fall off very easily'<sup>42</sup>.

It should also be noted that besides riding saddles nomadic peoples used special pack saddles, as evidenced by a mention found in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, 'I hopped on a pack saddle and made off'<sup>43</sup>. Regrettably, no information on their shape and construction has survived. Most probably, saddles of this type were of simpler construction. They could have had a wooden skeleton with a fork and cantle lower than those of a riding saddle.

*Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra*

<sup>39</sup> M. L. Shvecov, *Pozdnekochevničeskoe ...*, fig. 1.

<sup>40</sup> E. V. Kovychev, *Istorija Zabajkal'ja ...*, p. 43, fig. 15.

<sup>41</sup> W. Świątosławski, *Arms and Armour of the Nomads of the Great Steppe in the Times of the Mongol Expansion (12th-14th Centuries)*, Łódź 1999, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> *The Mongol Mission ...*, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> *The Secret History of the Mongols ...*, p. 99.

