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## THE “TALYSH” TYPE DAGGERS IN UKRAINE

### ABSTRACT

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The article presents several daggers from Ukraine that have yet to be interpreted. The available data allows us to connect them to the bladed weapons of the Late Bronze Age Middle East. In addition, new, previously unpublished materials are introduced. The chronology of the spreading of so-called Talysh daggers as far as to the North Pontic Region for approximately half a millennia is reconstructed. Most of these items are unique in terms of geography and technology, so they are vital to studying the Talysh daggers of the Middle East.

Keywords: Talysh daggers, Bronze Age, Hakkari stelae, Middle East, North Pontic Region  
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### 1. INTRODUCTION. PECULIAR FINDINGS FROM UKRAINE

Around 2014, the Museum of Local History in Romny (Sumy region, Ukraine) received a bronze dagger approximately 20 cm long (Fig. 1: 1). It has a mushroom-shaped pommel, simple vertical ornament on the handle, a semicircular guard with rounded edges and a wide blade with double rib. The closest Ukrainian analogy is the find from Stepantsi village

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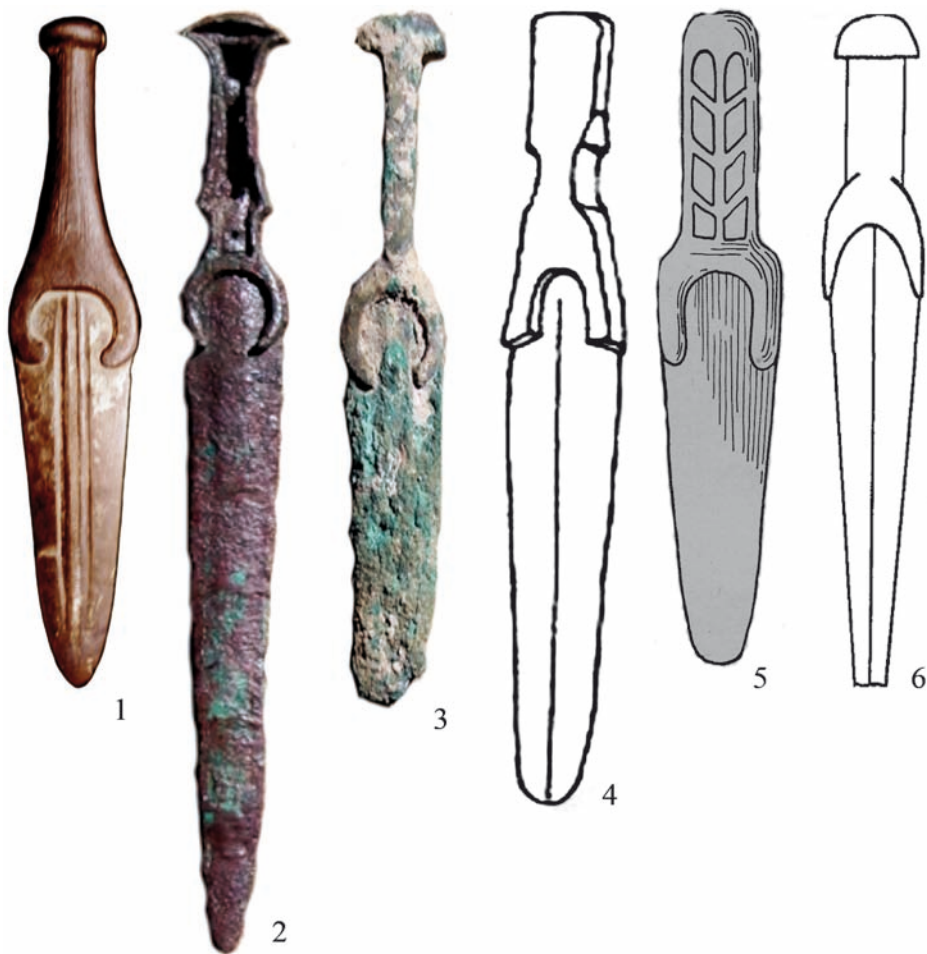


Fig. 1. Daggers with semicircular guard:

1 – Romny, Ukraine (from the collection of Romny museum of local history), 2, 3 – Haft Tappeh, Iran (from Rafei-Alavi 2019, fig. 1), 4 – Beshtasheni burial ground, Georgia (from Shaeffer 1948, fig. 280), 5 – Stepantsi, Ukraine (from Terenozhkin 1961, fig. 90), 6 – Hasanlu-4, Iran (from Dyson 1964, fig. 2), 6 – iron, the remainder – bronze

in the Cherkasy region (Fig. 1: 5). It is 25 cm long; there is an ornament on the handle in the form of four rectangles, the guard also has the shape of a semicircle. According to O. I. Terenozhkin, such a guard imitates an organic one – made of bone or horn (Terenozhkin 1961, 135). The blade of the dagger is also wide but without a rib and with a rounded edge. Based on the geometrical ornament, O. I. Terenozhkin attributed this find to the Chornolissia culture (Terenozhkin 1961, 135).

Generally speaking the semicircular guard is common among the European types of Bronze Age bladed weapons (Klochko 2006, fig. 95: 1-5, 10, 11). Initially such technology would be represented by the organic materials (wood, bone *etc.*), which is indicated by the swords with tongue-shaped handles (Klochko 2006, fig. 95: 6-9): on them we see the holes for rivets used to connect the organic part of the handle. Rivets in identical places are seen on the items with semicircular guard. This was probably the reason for O. I. Terenozhkin’s assumption about the guard of the Stepantsi dagger imitating an organic one.

However, upon closer examination it becomes obvious that the resemblance of Stepantsi and Romny findings to the weapons of Urnenfeld cultures is merely general. Although their guards are different from one another, their form differs from the European items: they are thinner, more attenuated (in the case of the Stepantsi dagger) or rounded (in the case of the Romny dagger). The absence of rivets on both items indicate a different connection of the blade and handle.

## 2. “PROTO-” AND “POST-TALYSH” DAGGERS FROM THE CAUCASUS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The closest geographical analogy comes from the Beshtasheni burial ground in Georgia (Fig. 1: 4). This one is also made of bronze, has a flat handle (although – non-ornamented) as well as wide blade with a rib and rounded edge. Generally speaking, the semicircular guard was common in the Caucasus region during the Bronze Age, however its form is different – shorter and wider.

Daggers similar to these three can be found in the archaeology of the Middle East. The earliest daggers of this type (nine known as of 2019) are dated back from the 15 to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. They consist of separately cast blade and handle with the guard serving to join them (Rafiei-Alavi 2019, 315-317) (Fig. 1: 2, 3). The same would be fair for the later variant of these daggers, except those made of iron. One comes from Hasanlu-4, northern Iran (Fig. 1: 6). It is an iron dagger with mushroom-shaped pommel, lost edge and a semicircular guard resembling those seen on the finds from Ukraine. According to the British archaeologist R. Dyson, such a guard is the result of evolution of a semicircular piece on the base of the dagger that was initially purely decorative in function. The evolution gave it a practical function – making a connection between the blade and the handle. This and other similar items were attributed to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC (Dyson 1964, 42). In 2019, there were thirteen iron daggers with semicircular guard known; all of them come from Western and South-Western Caspian regions and are dated within the range of 11-9<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Rafiei-Alavi 2019, 318). There is quite a variation between them, however all possess the specific form of aguard.

### 3. THE HAKKARI STELAE

Such daggers are depicted on eleven of the thirteen stone stelae which had been found in the city of Hakkari (south-eastern Turkey) in 1998 (Figs 4 and 5). These stelae strongly resemble the sculptures of the Yamna and Catacomb cultures of the North Pontic Region. Their foreign origin was also obvious to the researchers, who noted that depicted motives are typical for the northern nomadic tribes rather than local peoples (Sevin 2005, 131). Based on the weapons depicted, the Hakkari stelae were attributed to the second millennium BC: the axes date to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC (Sevin 2005, 130) which belongs to the chronological line of the initial daggers with semicircular guard. Therefore, if the Hakkari stelae were indeed created by the Indo-European nomads whose ancestors used to inhabit the North Pontic Region, it explains the appearance of the daggers with semicircular guards from the Middle East in Ukraine.

More recent study suggests that the Hakkari stelae had been crafted in the period of two and a half centuries (Cesaretti and Dan 2021, 141) and places them in the first millennium BC, based on the depicted daggers (Cesaretti and Dan 2021, 140). However, such dating ignores other possible chronological markers (axes and original daggers with semicircular guard) as well as the Indo-European context.

### 4. TALYSH DAGGERS

Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, daggers with semicircular guard were transformed. The evolved items have several names in different sources. Their initial name – the Talysh type (Shaeffer 1948) comes after the region near the Caspian Sea where such daggers were first discovered. Later the name was downgraded to that of a ‘variant’ as more context and relation to other types of bladed weapons of the region became known. Currently the names ‘the dagger with crescent-shaped guard’ or ‘...with penannular guard’ (Rafiei-Alavi 2019) can be found. The reason for such a change is most likely dictated by the larger context which will be shown further below. However, we will use the name ‘Talysh’ here because, as was shown in the introduction, the semicircular guard itself is not rare outside of the Middle East.

As was briefly mentioned before, the daggers which existed between bronze and iron items with functional semicircular guard, had a similar piece on the base of the blade, which, however, was purely decorative. It is important to note that this semicircle was not a separate detail, but a part of the blade, cast on and with it. The appearance of such piece is believed to be a byproduct of the evolution. Unlike its predecessors (which consisted of a separate blade and handle), the classic Talysh daggers were cast as a single piece and thus the necessity of a joining element vanished. Therefore, the presence of a semicircle on such items is considered purely symbolic – a tribute to the tradition (Rafiei-Alavi 2019,



Fig. 2. Talysh daggers: 1 – Klardasht, Iran (from Rafei-Alavi 2019, fig. 7), 2 – Marlik, Iran (from Vahdati and Piller 2018, fig. 13), 3 – Zhovnino, Ukraine (from the personal archive of V. I. Klochko), 4 – Dnipro region, Ukraine. 1 – gold; 2, 3 – bronze; 4 – bronze and copper



Fig. 3. Semicircular detail on the daggers from Zhovnino (1) and Dnipro region (2)



Fig. 4. Stelae from Hakkari (A) and Ukraine (B) (from Klochko 2007, fig. 8)

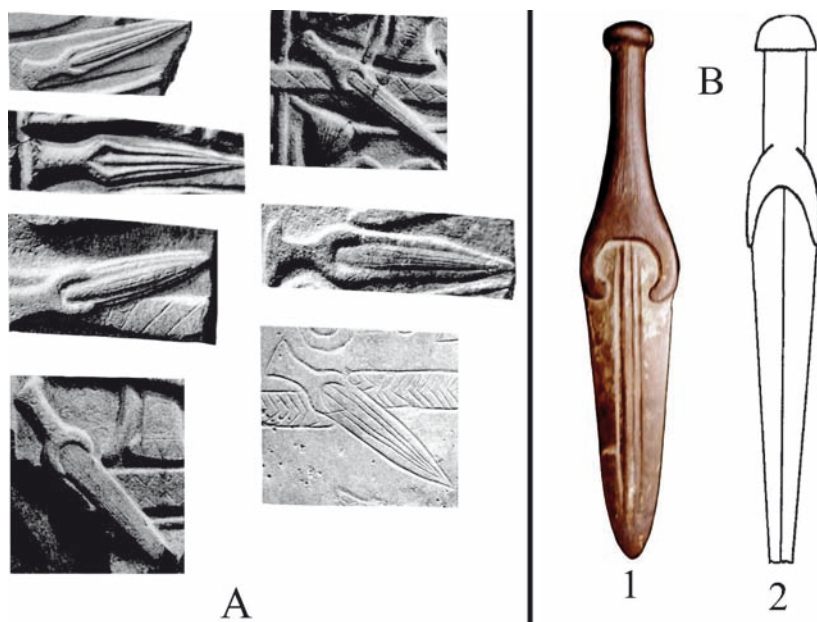


Fig. 5. Daggers on the Hakkari stelae (A) and their analogies (B). 1 – Romny, Ukraine, 2 – Hasanlu-4, Iran



327). Among other features of the Talysh daggers are the large size of some items (meaning they can be described rather as short swords), the flat handle (with relief decoration in some cases) and also the wide pommel. There are 44 finds of such items known in the Middle East as of 2019 (Rafiei-Alavi 2019, 318). Aside from the bronze ones, most likely used in combat (Fig. 2: 2) there is also the gold one (Fig. 2: 1) that was found near Klardasht village in northern Iran (Rafiei-Alavi 2019, fig. 7). Also the Talysh type dagger is one of three depicted on the golden bowl from Hasanlu-4 (Winter 1989, fig. 14). Therefore, it is clear that in those times the such daggers were the main bladed weapon all over the Middle East.

In the 1970-s in Zhovnino village of the Cherkasy region, Ukraine a broad bronze blade (26-27 cm long) was discovered. The handle is absent, as it was probably made of organic materials. There is a separate semicircular detail on the blade, the cone-shaped part of which was used to connect the handle to the blade. Also it has a hole, presumably for some decoration (Fig. 2: 3). The find resembles classic Talysh daggers, however it also differs: firstly, due to the separate handle (which is absent); secondly due to the semicircular detail being a separate item rather than a part of the blade; moreover, the latter actually had a purpose beyond the symbolic on this dagger as it connected the handle and the blade (Fig. 3: 1).

Recently a similar item was found in the Dnipro region of Ukraine (Fig. 2: 4). It is 44 cm long, and has a stand-alone semicircle on the base of the blade, and it is notable because it is made not of bronze (as the rest of the dagger) but of copper (Fig. 3: 2). The bronze handle is wide, rod-shaped, ending with the bronze pin, which was probably used as an attachment for the absent pommel.

## 5. RECONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION

In the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC, the Indoeuropean tribes reached the Middle East and Asia Minor. Their ancestors inhabited the North Pontic Region as the peoples of Yamna and Catacomb cultures. Those nomads brought their own art to their new homeland while appropriating local weapons, including the bronze daggers with the semicircular guard (the ‘proto-Talysh’ type). This whole process is indicated by the stelae from Hakkari. Presumably the Indoeuropean migration could have influenced the spreading of proto-Talysh daggers to the north – first in the Caucasus region (as evident by the dagger from the Beshtasheni burial ground) and eventually to the North Pontic Region, which is indicated by the dagger from Romny.

Later (around the early 13<sup>th</sup> century BC), daggers with a semicircular guard evolve into the classic Talysh daggers, with the guard losing its original purpose. Such an evolution was known in the North Pontic Region, considering the findings from Zhovnino and the Dnipro region. There are two possible interpretations for the former item: it can be an





**Fig. 6.** Map of items presented in the article.

Red dots – daggers with semicircular guard. 1 – Romny, Ukraine; 2 – Stepantsi, Ukraine; 3 – Beshtasheni burial ground, Georgia; 4 – Haft Tappeh, Iran; 5 – Hasanlu-4, Iran. Blue dots – Talysh daggers. 6 – Zhovnino, Ukraine; 7 – Dnipro region, Ukraine; 8 – Marlik, Iran; 9 – Klardasht, Iran. Green star – Hakkari stelae

imitation of the Talysh daggers, made by someone not deeply familiar with their technology, or a transitional variant between the proto-Talysh type and its evolved form. Neither theory currently has any support, as the Zhovnino find is unique. However, it can be safely assumed that in both options this dagger is not native to Ukraine but an import. Regarding the find from the Dnipro region, it is most likely an imperfect imitation rather than early variant, as the semicircular detail on it possesses no obvious function, having only the symbolic meaning, while the handle resembles those of Talysh type only loosely. Also, we can assume that this item was an import, rather than a local production, as there are no classic Talysh daggers currently known in Eastern Europe.

Eventually (around 9<sup>th</sup> century BC), with the discovery of iron, the semicircular guard re-emerges. The post-Talysh daggers strongly resemble the proto-Talysh type, as evident by the example from Hasanlu-4, the main difference being the raw material – iron instead of bronze. In Ukraine, however, this tradition remains within the same metal as before, as evidenced by the dagger from Stepantsi. This one is most likely a local imitation rather than an import – firstly, it is made of bronze, not iron; secondly, the geometrical ornament on its handle was quite widespread in North Pontic Region during the finale of the Bronze Age.

## 6. CONCLUSION. ACHIEVEMENTS AND FURTHER POTENTIAL

Currently, the number of finds relative to the subject is small. However, even such a number clearly shows that the inhabitants of the North Pontic Region had been quite familiar with the bladed weapons of the Middle East for around half a millennia – from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. This is indicated by the analogies of proto- and post-Talysh type daggers, as well as the imitation of a classic Talysh item and possibly its direct predecessor. These finds are essential to studying weaponry of such types as they extend the geography of their spread and also may show “blind spots” in the known typology during the transition from one stage of evolution to another.

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