Once Again on the Question of the Dating of Inscriptions from Prokhorovka

Archil S. Balakhvantsev* and Leonid T. Yablonskii**

Abstract
This article is devoted to analysis of two Aramaic inscriptions on silver bowls found during looters’ excavations of Burial-mound I near the village of Prokhorovka in the Southern Urals in 1911. The palaeographic and linguistic data obtained during analysis of the inscriptions and also new archaeological materials, which came to light only after the archaeological investigation of the burial-mound was completed in 2003, make it possible to date them to a period no later than the end of the 3rd century BC.

Keywords
Southern Urals, Early Sarmatians, Prokhorovka burial-ground, archaeology, chronological data, phialai-phalarae, Parthian language, Aramaic inscriptions, Achaemenid Empire

The burial-ground near the village of Prokhorovka within the modern Sharlÿk District of the Orenburg Region on elevated ground near the watershed of the rivers Salmýsh and Sukhaya Dema became the key site for Sarmatian archaeology after the publication of M.I. Rostovtsev’s monograph.2 Let us remind readers how in that monograph Rostovtsev published the academic report compiled by S.I. Rudenko about his completed investigation of burial-mounds which had been looted by local peasants, in 1911 and that it was after he had undertaken an analysis of the finds that Rostovtsev linked that site with the Sarmatians of the written sources. The story of that looting and the events associated with the work of Rudenko’s expedition have been described in detail by V.Yu. Zuev3 using archive materials, which makes it unnecessary for

1 This study was carried out with a grant from the Russian Foundation for Humanities, No. 05-01-011597a.
2 Rostovtsev 1918.
3 Zuev 2003.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2009 DOI: 10.1163/092907709X12474657004764
us to recount these again. In the context of our work it is important, however, to note that the dating of the burial-ground changed more than once in the works of Rostovtsev himself.4

In the burial-mound, which Rudenko designated as No. 1 and which was situated in the southern part of the group, among other things two silver bowls were found in the central burial: on these there were two inscriptions executed using a punching technique. These inscriptions were first studied by the scholar, P.K. Kokovtsev.5 On one of these bowls Kokovtsev deciphered Iranian words “concealed by Aramaic script” and these he had translated as “bowl of Ātarmihr”. The inscription on the other phiale consisted, in his opinion, of no more than “signs for numerals and abbreviations”, which had denoted the weight of the bowl. Kokovtsev also noted that “both inscriptions had been written in the same general Aramaic script of a much later period: inscriptions on the coins of satraps of the last Achaemenids can be regarded as the most ancient example of that script and the Pahlavi script on the first two series of so-called coins of Persepolis (from the era of the Arshakids) as the latest”. Kokovtsev paid particular attention to the Semitic style in which the letter aleph had been written and he dated the inscriptions to the 3rd or 2nd century BC, referring as he did so to the problems standing in the way of providing a more precise date because of “the meagre range of epigraphic material available for the period in question as regards Aramaic palaeography”.

Unfortunately, in the course of the following 80 years the inscriptions from Prokhorovka were not turned to again by leading Iranists either in our country or abroad, apart from simple references in works by B.V. Henning6 and D.N. MacKenzie.7 Only the appearance of recent research undertaken by V.A. Livshits8 lent new momentum to the study of this question. When Livshits solved the question of the chronology of the inscriptions on the Prokhorovka phialai, executed, in his opinion, in the Parthian language, he had started out from the following observations. Firstly, the Prokhorovka inscriptions had, from the palaeographic point of view, borne a close resemblance to early Parthian texts of the period from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD9 Secondly, the “pseudo-case” form tšty with the ending ’y’ in the inscription on Phiale No. 1 has many parallels in ostraca from Old Nisa, the earliest of which

---

4 See: Rostovtsev 1918, 79: 3rd-1st centuries BC; Rostovtsev 1922, 124: 4th-3rd centuries BC; Rostovtsev 1925, 611: 2nd-1st centuries BC.
5 Rostovtsev 1918, 82-83.
9 Livshits & Zuev 2004, 8.