

Article

Scythian Jewelry Meshes and the Problem of Their Interpretation

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Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of a specific type of personal adornment worn by members of the Scythian elite in the North Black Sea region in the second half of the 5th century and throughout the 4th century BCE. The discussion juxtaposes the records from 19th-century and early 20th-century excavations with contextual analyses of very recent discoveries from Ukraine, which shed significant new light on the appearance, production, and meaning of Scythian jewelry. The reconstruction of the shape of the jewelry type in question is greatly complicated by two factors: the lack of relevant depictions in the contemporary corpus of Scythian and Greco-Scythian figure scenes and misleading scholarly references to supposed analogies in a Roman-era mosaic, which became the chief reason for the misinterpretations of the ornament's appearance. Composed of numerous gold or gilded silver tubes; beads; pendants; and, sometimes, "buttons," this jewelry type is reconstructed in two gender-specific variants in this article: one mesh-like and the other with a cross-chest form. For over a hundred years, scholars have considered only the mesh variant to be the correct reconstruction. As a result, many costume reconstructions of this jewelry form in specialist research and museum displays alike are still proposed without a sufficient evidentiary base.

Keywords: Scythian culture; jewelry; meshes; reconstruction

1. Introduction

This article concerns an aspect of Scythian material culture, specifically, its costume decor. Scythians formed a broad cultural unity with the sedentary native population of the Forest-Steppe and co-existed with the Greek colonists of the northern Black Sea coast during the 7th–4th centuries BCE (Figure 1). It should be noted that the term *Scythians* became so universal in many synoptic scholarly works that it started to gain use as a name that was given to many nomadic societies to the east of the Black Sea, as far as the Altai Mountains (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 169–172, 312; Beckwith 2022, pp. 35–37). This led to a situation in which it became problematic to refer to Scythian material culture without distinguishing between Scythian archaeological remains from the northern Black Sea region and those from the Scythians' eastern neighbors (i.e., Massagetae, Saka, and the peoples of the Pazyryk and Aldy-Bel archaeological cultures). Several scholars have highlighted the issues that have resulted from the broad use of the Scythian name (Raevskiy 1993; Yablonsky 2000, pp. 4–5; Raevskiy et al. 2013, p. 6; Meyer 2013, p. 98; Yablonsky 2015, pp. 109, 112; Shelekhan 2020, p. 28; Shelekhan and Lifantii 2022, p. 40, footnote 1; Lifantii 2023, p. 11, footnote 1). However, the problem remains unsettled to this day.

Therefore, I should emphasize that, with the term Scythians, this article refers to nomadic and farmer peoples who lived to the north of the Black Sea, mainly in the area between the Danube and Don rivers, from the early 7th till the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 3rd century BCE. Many kurgans with specific types of tomb constructions and funerary rites, as well as settlements with characteristic dwellings and occupation layers, represent the region's Scythian archaeological culture. The other neighboring peoples mentioned above, however closely related their culture might be to that of the Scythians, cannot be identified as such in the original meaning of the term given by Herodotus (4. 6) in the 5th century BCE.



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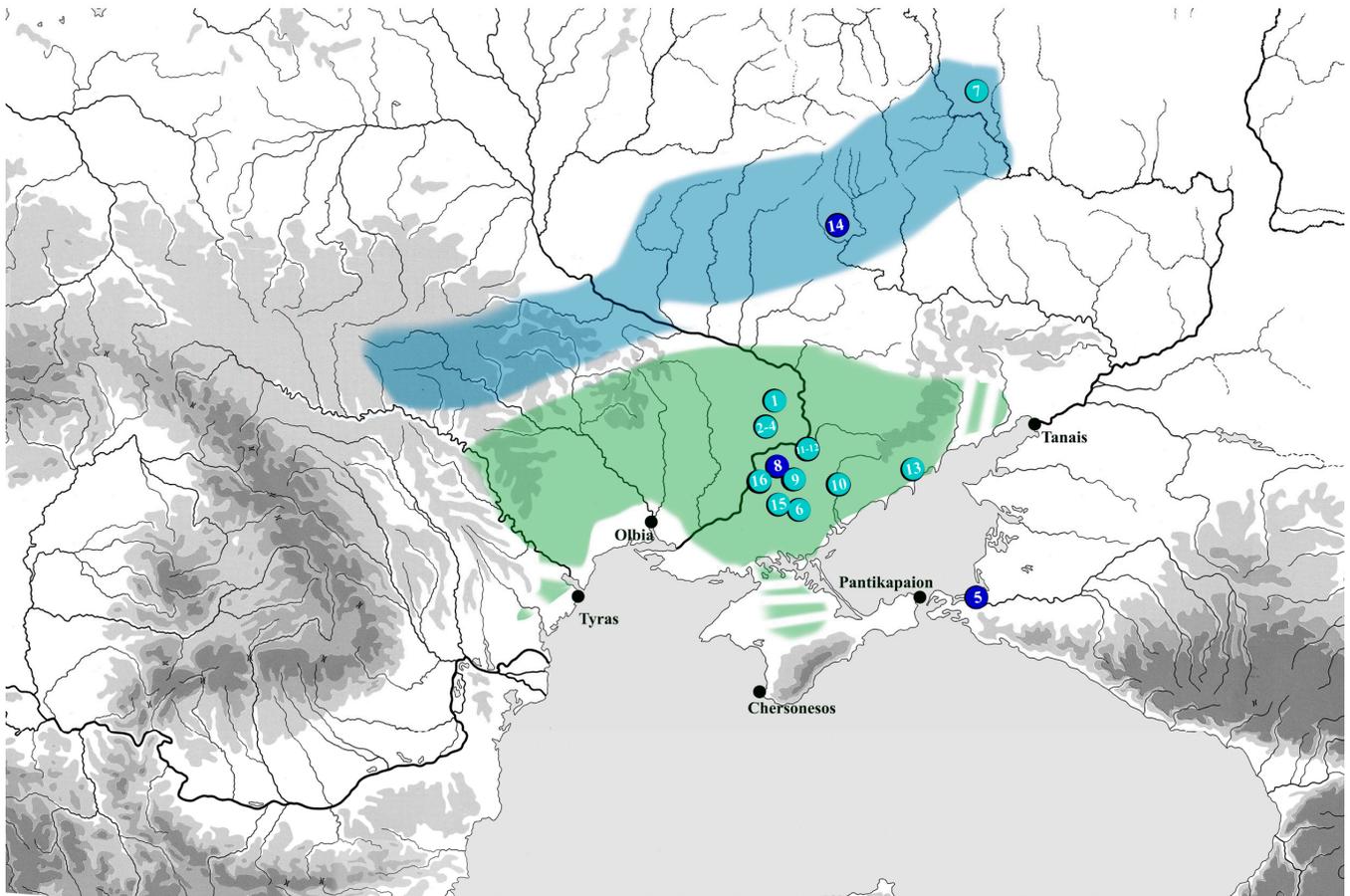


Figure 1. Map of the finds of mesh-like and cross-chest jewelry. Middle 5th–4th centuries BCE. (Numbers correspond to the monument numbers in Table 1. Dark blue dots represent the 5th-century BCE kurgans, and turquoise dots represent the 4th-century BCE kurgans. The blue area shows the spread of Forest-Steppe monuments, and the green area shows the spread of Steppe monuments.)

In the present article, I shall revisit one peculiar type of Scythian personal adornment that gained the name “mesh” or “net jewelry”¹ and review the numerous misconceptions applied to this jewelry type during more than a century of research. This problem was briefly highlighted in earlier research (Lifantii 2020, p. 122), alongside other terminological and typological issues concerning garment appliques.

2. Materials

The jewelry finds that I analyze in this paper are known only from the burials of the elite Scythian nomadic strata (Figure 1; Table 1). They are absent from the materials of neighboring archaeological cultures (including most eastern Eurasian ones) in the region.

One distinctive feature of this type of jewelry is the impressive number of elements contained in each item: tubes (more than 60), beads or “buttons”² (around 20 or more), and pendants (more than 10). The elements are primarily found in one place in the grave. Sometimes, the number of elements in one set can be close to a thousand (see Table 1: No. 8 and 10).

Based on these construction elements, we can distinguish 16 instances among all probable finds of mesh decoration in which a particular type of shoulder ornament can be isolated (Figure 1; Table 1). The main identifying feature of this item is the integration of two types of appliques, namely, gold or silver tubes (10–25 mm in length) and pendants (29–35 mm in length), into one assemblage (Figure 2). In certain cases, these components can also include simple, non-ornamented beads (4–10 mm in diameter) and “buttons” (5–6 mm in diameter).



Figure 2. Types of applique used in mesh-like and cross-chest (?) decorations from several kurgans: 1—Melitopol kurgan; 2—Luhova Mohyla; 3—Haimanova Mohyla; 4—Mala Lepetykha, kurgan No. 9; and 5—Berdianskyi kurgan (photographs by the Treasury of the NMHU and by the author, also after *Drevnosti Gerodotovoi Skifii* 1872 and Bidzilia and Polin 2012). Arbitrary scale.

Items of this type have been found, for instance, in situ around the skulls and necks and on the chests of skeletons in burials in Luhova Mohyla³ (Table 1: No. 1), kurgan No. 2 of the Seven Brothers group (Table 1: No. 5), a side grave of Solokha kurgan (Table 1: No.8), and grave No. 1 of Melitopol kurgan (Table 1: No. 10). In other tombs, these items have been discovered in a small separate pile within the graves, as was the case in Mastyugino First barrow (Table 1: No. 7) and the central grave of Berdianskyi kurgan (Table 1: No. 13). Such assemblages have also been found in a separate pile in a special chamber of the tombs, as in the Chortomlyk (Table 1: No. 2–4), or in a small niche in the wall, as in grave No. 4 of kurgan No. 9 near Mala Lepetykha village (Table 1: No. 16).

Table 1. Probable finds of meshes and cross-chest decorations.

No	Monument	Shape of Element: Number of Items in the Grave	Sex, Age ⁴	Place in the Grave	Excavation Date and Researcher of the Monument
1.	Luhova Mohyla, side northeastern grave (Petrykivka village, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 17 tubes: 60 short tubes: 3 pendants: 22	M (?), 30 y. o.	Near the skull, on the remains of fabrics, “which they probably decorated” (<i>Drevnosti Gerodotovoï Skifii 1866</i> , p. 23)	1856, excavated by Oleksandr Liutsenko
2.	Chortomlyk, central burial structure, chamber No. 1 (southeastern), mesh No. 3 (Chkalove village, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine)	buttons: 30 tubes: 99 ⁵ pendants: 58	F?	Near the southeastern wall of the grave	1863, excavated by Ivan Zabelin
3.	Chortomlyk, central burial structure, chamber No. 2 (northeastern), mesh No. 1 (Chkalove village, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine)	buttons: 6 beads: 113 tubes: 442 pendants: 61	F?	In a pile near the southeastern wall of the grave	1863, excavated by Ivan Zabelin
4.	Chortomlyk, central burial structure, chamber No. 2 (northeastern), mesh No. 2 (Chkalove village, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine)	buttons: 43 ⁶ tubes: 186 pendants: 97 ⁷	F?	In a pile near the southeastern wall of the grave	1863, excavated by Ivan Zabelin
5.	Seven Brothers group, kurgan No. 2 (stanitsa Varenikovskaya, Krasnodar Krai, Russia)	beads: 18 tubes: 126 pendants: 19	M?	Covered the remains of a skeleton on the burial platform	1875, excavated by Woldemar Baron von Tiesenhausen
6.	Diiv kurgan, inlet grave (Nyzhni Sirohozy urban-type settlement, Kherson Oblast, Ukraine)	buttons: 76 tubes: 210	F?	Unknown	1891, excavated by Nikolay Veselovskiy
7.	Mastyugino First barrow (Mastyugino village, Voronezh Oblast, Russia)	buttons without loops: 357 tubes: 308 pendants: 24	M?	Near the burial platform in the remains of fabric, along with many other types of appliques	1905, excavated by Aleksandr Spitsyin
8.	Solokha, side grave (between Velyka Znamianka and Verkhniï Rohachyk villages, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine)	tubes: 979 pendants: 66	M?	Located in a row placed from skeleton B’s neck to the niche’s N wall. It may have been sewn on a fabric ribbon	1913, excavated by Nikolay Veselovskiy

Table 1. Cont.

No	Monument	Shape of Element: Number of Items in the Grave	Sex, Age ⁸	Place in the Grave	Excavation Date and Researcher of the Monument
9.	Verkhni Rohachyk kurgan, "centrale grave" (Verkhni Rohachyk urban-type settlement, Kherson Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 171 tubes: 372 pendants: 7	F?	Unknown	1914, excavated by Nikolay Veselovskiy
10.	Melitopol kurgan, grave No. 1 (Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 226 tubes: 719 pendants: 47	F, older age	At the place where the head of the deceased had to be. Certain parts remain untouched and formed in triangles of tubes with rosettes	1954, excavated by the expedition led by Oleksii Terenozhkin
11.	Haimanova Mohyla south grave No. 4, burial 3 (Balky village, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine)	buttons: 51 beads: 14 tubes: 123 pendants: 10	F?	In the soil filling of the entrance pit, dromos, and the chamber	1969–1970, excavated by an expedition led by Vasyly Bidzilia
12.	Haimanova Mohyla north grave No. 1 burial 3 (Balky village, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 21 tubes: 69 pendants: 16	F?	Mixed in the soil layer above burial No. 3 and in the dromos of entrance pit No. 1	1969–1970, excavated by an expedition led by Vasyly Bidzilia
13.	Berdianskyi kurgan, central grave (Novovasylivka urban-type settlement, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 163 tubes: 350 pendants: 36	M	On the grave floor in a square 1.5 × 1 m in size (along with remains of clothes and headdress decorations)	1977–1978, excavated by the expedition led by Mykola Cherednychenko
14.	Pisochyn barrow No. 2 (Pisochyn urban-type settlement, Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine)	tubes: 70 pendants: 14 ⁹	F?	Mixed in the filling of a looted grave	1978, excavated by the expedition led by Viacheslav Borodulin
15.	Ohuz kurgan, north grave (Nyzhni Sirohozy urban-type settlement, Kherson Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 88 tubes: 206 pendants: 1	F?	In a mixed filling layer of a looted chamber	1979–1981, excavated by the expedition led by Yurii Boltryk
16.	Mala Lepetykha, kurgan No. 9, grave No. 4 (Mala Lepetykha village, Kherson Oblast, Ukraine)	beads: 249 tubes: 444 pendants: 29	F, 30–35 y. o.	In niche No. 2	1992, excavated by the expedition led by Hennadii Yevdokymov

3. History of the Finds

This special type of Scythian ornament first came to the attention of scholarship during the excavations of Chortomlyk kurgan in 1862–1863, thanks to a peculiar oxidation pattern on the bronze disk and iron handle of the mirror in the Scythian woman's grave (Figure 3: 2). In this instance, part of the mesh had been deposited on the mirror, leaving a rhomboid-shaped imprint on the object's corroded surface. The imprint had been formed by the small gold tubes, "buttons," and glass beads. In the excavation report, Zabelin referred to this jewelry as "net attire" (*Drevnosti Gerodotovoï Skifii* 1872, p. 97). Together with another, much later find recorded in situ in the Melitopol kurgan (Figure 3: 3), the Chortomlyk imprint remains the strongest direct evidence of a jewelry type consisting of interconnected tubes arranged in a rhomboid or diamond-shaped arrangement.

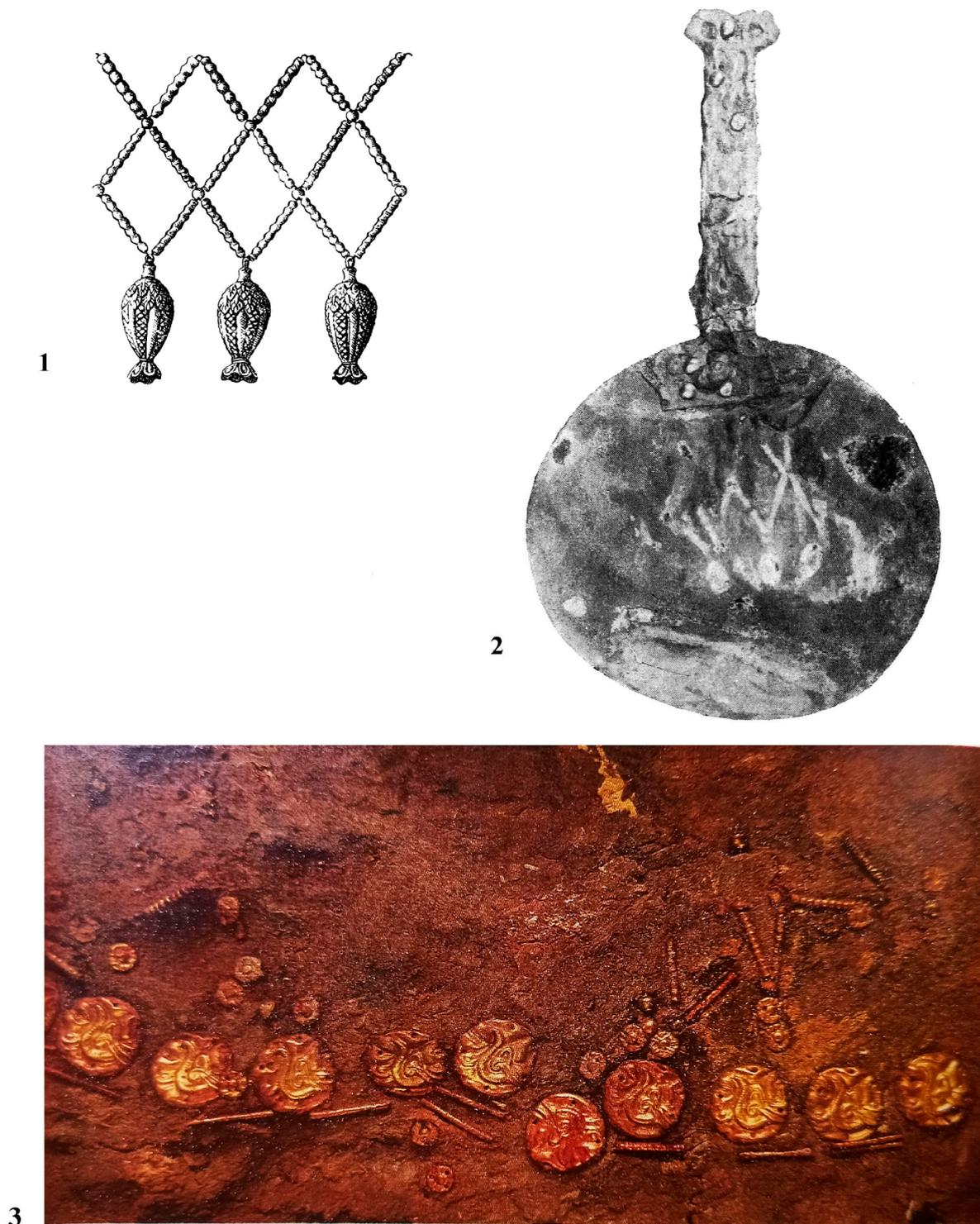


Figure 3. 1—reconstruction of mesh-like decoration made by Anastasia Mantsevich; 2—photo of mirror from Chortomlyk kurgan (after [Mantsevich 1948](#)); and 3—photo of the unearthened gold appliques in the partly looted grave of Melitopol kurgan (after [Terenozhkin and Mozolevskiy 1988](#)).

In Seven Brothers barrow No. 2, excavated in 1875, another type of decoration with similar elements was brought to light. Specifically, many gold tubes, beads, and pendants covered the remains of a skeleton on a burial platform. Based on these excavations, Vladimir Tiesenhausen believed that only the gold tubes belonged to the jewelry set, which he reconstructed as a single, long strand that could wind around the neck about ten times. He thought that the other appliques from the set were part of another necklace ([Otchet 1879](#),

p. 120). As a result of Tiesenhausen’s misleading assumptions, many scholars and museum conservation experts mistakenly envisioned the item as a “necklace” (e.g., [Goroncharovskiy 2014](#), pp. 556–57).

During his excavation of the Scythian grave in the Solokha kurgan in 1912–1913, Nikolay Veselovskiy found the remains of an ornament made of the same elements. In this case, the excavator traced a triple row of gold tubes with gold amphora-shaped pendants attached to their intersections ([Otchet 1918](#), pp. 113–14). Not unlike Tiesenhausen, Veselovskiy thought that this element was part of a ribbon-shaped decoration that was combined with a row of appliques embossed with depictions of a “ram attacked by some beast.”¹⁰ In a 1914 preliminary survey of the excavation, Boris [Pharmakowsky \(1914, p. 273\)](#) indicated that the same kind of jewelry from Solokha was depicted on the Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii (Figure 4: 4). Approximately ten years later, Mikhail [Rostovtzeff \(1925, p. 451\)](#) argued that the item from Solokha consisted only of tubes and pendants (excluding the appliques with the goats) sewn on a ribbon and wound across its owner’s chest.

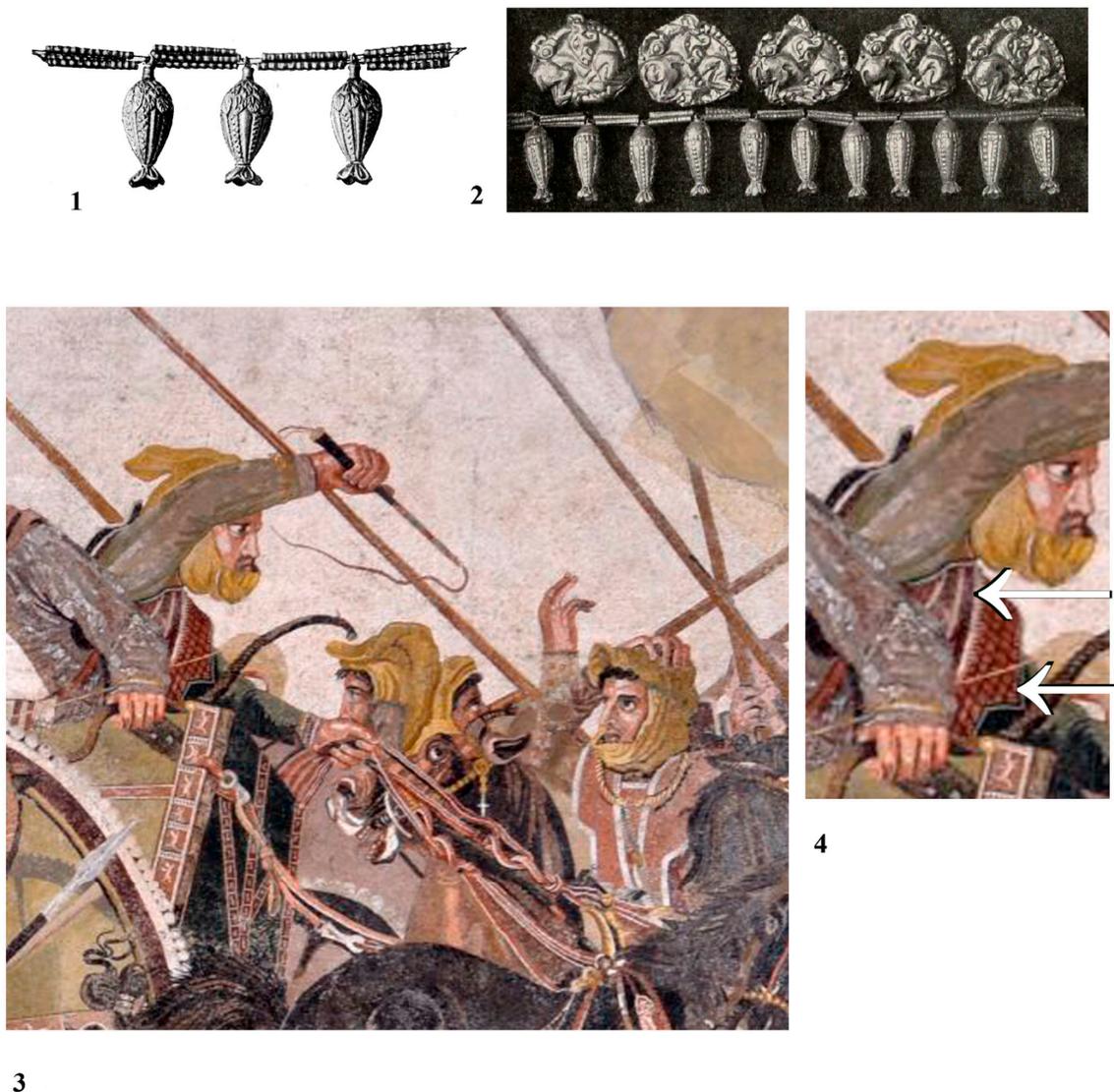


Figure 4. 1—reconstruction of a cross-chest decoration from Verchnii Rohachik (after [Mantsevich 1948](#)); 2—reconstruction of a cross-chest decoration from Solokha (after [Otchet 1879](#) and [Pharmakowsky 1914](#)); 3—detail of the Alexander Mosaic; and 4—arrows showing the jewelry and collar (inv. 10020, by <https://mann-napoli.it>, accessed on 8 April 2024).

Another undisturbed burial with a similar set of appliques—made of silver, this time—was excavated in 1856 (earlier than the previously described cases of finds in other barrows) from the side northeastern grave of Luhova Mohyla kurgan (*Drevnosti Gerodotovoi Skifii* 1866, p. 23; Polin and Alekseev 2018, pp. 136, 271). In this find, the silver set of tubes, beads, and pendants was found on fabric remains which are associated with the male burial chamber. Only much later was the discovery interpreted as a possible mesh-like decoration (Mantsevich 1948, p. 72). However, Serhii Polin expressed his doubts about the silver finds in Luhova Mohyla (Bidzilia and Polin 2012, p. 295, footnote 124), indicating that, in other kurgans of the period, such silver tubes were more commonly found in horse graves. In a more recent study, he added that no such silver finds had ever surfaced in the Luhova Mohyla (Polin and Alekseev 2018, p. 266, footnote 499). However, in the same book, Polin cites the first publication discussing the 19th-century excavation of this kurgan. In the work, the original excavator describes this silver jewelry set as having been found near the human skull of the inhumed body (Polin and Alekseev 2018, p. 86; see also Table 1: No. 1). Thus, despite conflicting opinions, it is plausible that the northeastern tomb of Luhova Mohyla yielded a mesh-like or cross-chest decoration.

In 1954, in the partly robbed side grave of the Melitopol kurgan, Oleksii Terenozhkin identified the remains of a comparable type of gold jewelry (consisting of 21 tubes, 15 rosettes, and 15 “buttons”), which was—according to the researchers—connected to a band with 11 appliques decorated with depictions of Athena (Terenzhkin and Mozolevskiy 1988, pp. 33–34, Figure 30). Lately, an attempt has been made to reconstruct this ornament, “with a significant hypothetical assumption”, as a “net-like attire” made of triangles that contain gold tubes; rosettes; and, probably, “buttons” (Klochko and Vasina 2017, p. 162, Figure 9).

Before the excavations at the Melitopol kurgan, Anastasia Mantsevich (1948) wrote an article dedicated to the type of personal adornment with which we are concerned. It remains the only thorough study on this subject. She collected all examples of relevant jewelry sets known to her and that she believed had originally belonged to such meshes. Her list included finds from ten Scythian and, possibly, Sauromatian kurgans. Mantsevich also made the first reconstruction drawings of the jewelry’s design (Figure 3: 1; Figure 4: 1), one of which was used as a basis for later reconstructions made by other specialists (Figure 5). However, she made several unfortunate mistakes during her research, which influenced most of the subsequent explorations of this jewelry type—a legacy that requires closer investigation in the context of the current discussion.

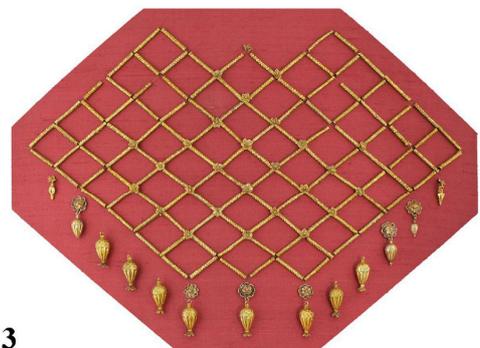
Firstly, Mantsevich (1948; 1987, p. 19) wrongly interpreted the depiction in the Alexander mosaic from Pompeii, believing that the mesh illustration was visible on the collar of King Darius’ charioteer. This statement gained popularity among scholars, but it is incorrect. Since Sergey Yatsenko highlighted the mistake only in passing, without any further explanation of its implications (Yatsenko 2006, p. 71, footnote 91), researchers continue to repeat it (Bidzilia and Polin 2012, pp. 294–95). Thus, I will propose my argument on this misinterpretation. On the mosaic, probably a 2nd-century CE Roman copy of an unknown Greek painting from the 4th century BCE, we can see many details of the clothes and jewelry designs of Greek and Persian warriors (Figure 4: 3). One of the Persians (King Darius’ charioteer) wears a long, sash-like decoration from the left shoulder across his chest (Figure 4: 4). It is made with white mosaic pieces and shown as a row of tubes (?) and pendants. At the same time, the man’s collar displays a net-like adornment, which reveals the structure of the fabric or embroidery. This construction detail is evident because its rhombic shape is incorporated into the collar that has triangular folds. It should also be noted that the exact same shape of collar folds can be seen on the dress of another mounted Persian to the right of the main scene (Figure 4: 3).



1



2



3

Figure 5. Reconstructions of mesh-like decorations: 1—from Berdianskyi kurgan (after [Fialko 2014](#)); 2—from Mala Lepetykha, kurgan No. 9 (after [Klochko and Vasina 2002](#)); and 3—from Haimanova Mohyla, made by L. Klochko (photograph by the Treasury of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine).

Thus, we can confidently argue that, while comparing the depiction from the so-called Alexander mosaic with this jewelry design, Pharmakowsky had in mind the long white row of tubes with pendants. He even illustrated it in his reconstruction ([Pharmakowsky 1914](#), pp. 261–62, abb. 97; [Figure 4: 2](#)). However, Mantsevich thought that Pharmakowsky was referring to the collar of a Persian with a rhombic ornament and declared the representation the only known depiction of the jewelry type. [Mantsevich \(1948, p. 72\)](#) even indicated that, much to her confusion, she was unable to find matching decorations in the art of Persia in Darius' age. As a result, [Mantsevich \(1948, p. 70\)](#) included in her list of mesh-like decorations practically all known cases of finds of gold or silver tubes from graves, even though the tubes are known to have been used in other types of jewelry, as she herself

emphasized with reference to, e.g., Syniavka barrow No. 100 (also known as Mohyla Ternivka).

Furthermore, Mantsevich (1948, p. 75) insisted on the Thracian origins of this type of adornment despite the complete absence of close analogies from Thracian sites. In lieu of close comparanda for the mesh jewelry, she cited eleven finds of “neck attires”¹¹ from Bulgaria, made from a gold sheet with punched designs of a geometric, theriomorphic, or phytomorphic nature. She even recognized net-like ornaments in the concentric rows of decorations on several breastplates from Thrace (Mantsevich 1948, p. 72, Figure 19). These analogies seem unconvincing because of their differences in shape, technology, and purpose.

Later remarks that researchers have made on this type of jewelry are worth mentioning. Sergey Yatsenko (2006, p. 51, reference 31; p. 71) uses the term “shoulder meshes” or “nets” to describe the jewelry type found in the graves of the Scythian nobility and views the decoration as part of “classical” Scythian elite clothing. He believes that these garments followed Greco-Persian fashions, with plaques possibly sewn onto the fabric as a pelerine (Yatsenko 2006, p. 71). Liubov Klochko (1997, Table 12) refers to the meshes as “neck decorations,” and most of her reconstructions are based on Mantsevich’s first drawing (Klochko and Vasina 2002, Figure 2). She also believes that the ornament is an original element of Scythian costume, which resulted from the borrowing of ancient Greek aesthetic principles (Klochko 1997, p. 118). Boltryk and Fialko (2007, pp. 72–73) describe this type of ornament as “removable, complicated breast jewelry,” in other words, an elaborate necklace. Finally, Serhii Polin added several more finds, for instance, those from Khomyna Mohyla, Volodymyrivka kurgan No. 1, Babyna Mohyla, etc., to Mantsevich’s list of meshes (Bidzilia and Polin 2012, p. 295). The scholar did not clarify the criteria of his selections. Apparently, the main reason was the presence of gold tubes, beads, and pendants, without consideration of the quantity of these components or the place where they were discovered in the grave. Polin (Bidzilia and Polin 2012, p. 295) believed that conclusive gold meshes were found in at least 19 Scythian kurgans.

4. One or Several Types of Jewelry, and How Do They Look?

After carefully analyzing all relevant finds, we can conclude that, strictly speaking, the shoulder decoration with which we are concerned does not have the mesh shape that was widely accepted in specialist literature (Mantsevich 1948; 1973, p. 14–15; Yatsenko 2006, p. 71; Boltryk and Fialko 2007, pp. 72–73; Bidzilia and Polin 2012, pp. 294–95). Instead, we distinguish at least two shoulder decoration types made of roughly the same set of appliques: mesh-like and cross-chest. I prefer the general term “shoulder decoration” because it covers the shoulders. Also, the main weight of the jewelry rests on one shoulder in the case of the cross-chest type and on both shoulders in the case of the mesh-like type.

However, because of the scarce archaeological data, it is hard to reconstruct the exact shape and construction of these ornaments unless they are documented in an undisturbed grave. Whether they had a mesh-like shape (as in the Chortomlyk and Melitopol barrows) or were in the form of a sash made of a triple-layered long row of tubes alternated with pendants across the chest (as in Solokha and the Seven Brothers) is usually unclear. Of course, this type of jewelry may have additional forms, which we have not taken into consideration yet. We cannot rule out alternative reconstructions as long as there is not a single depiction of this shoulder decoration on any Scythian monument.

Since the ornament’s two variations formed part of a shoulder adornment that was worn along with a complete ceremonial outfit, the probability that they were originally attached to fabric is relatively high (Figure 6). While Sergey Yatsenko (2006, p. 71) previously expressed the idea of sewing meshes to a textile without further explanation, we propose the following arguments in favor of this hypothesis for cross-chest decorations as well as meshes.

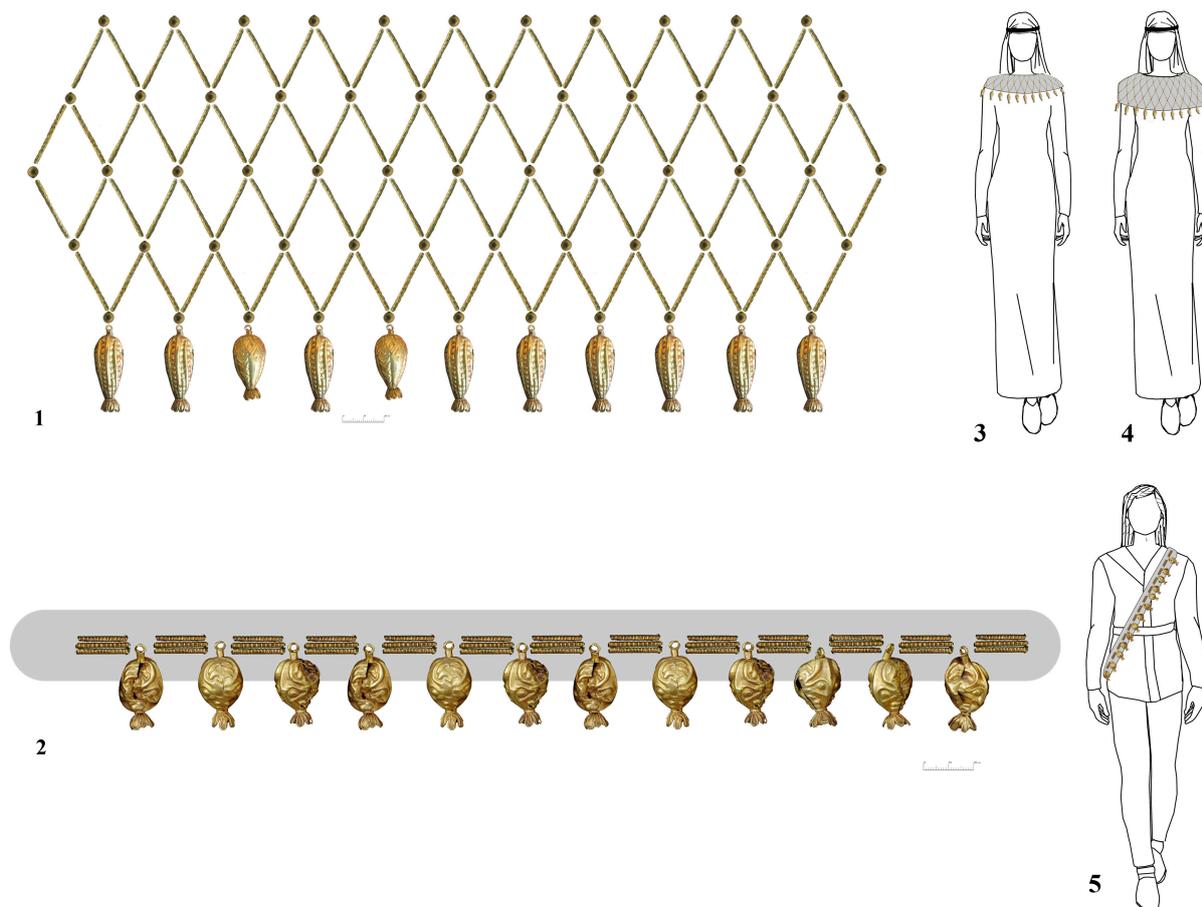


Figure 6. The possible size of mesh-like and cross-chest decorations and how they were worn: 1, 3 and 4—mesh-like jewelry; 2 and 5—cross-chest jewelry (drawings by the author).

Firstly, we have cases of such applique sets found on the remains of fabric to which they were probably sewn, namely, in Luhova Mohyla, Melitopol, Mastugyno First barrow, and, perhaps, in Solokha kurgan (see Table 1).

Secondly, it is hard to imagine that such a long row of thin gold tubes and hollowed pendants can be worn loosely on the shoulder and across the torso without risking damage to the thread or the tubes and beads made of thin gold sheets. The same situation applies to the large shoulder meshes worn without being sewn to a fabric support.¹²

Even under the best of circumstances, the archaeological contexts in which the relevant sets of appliques are discovered always leave room for interpretation. For example, in the Try Braty group¹³ barrow No. 1, an assemblage of gold tubes, pendants, and rosettes was found (Treister 2008, p. 113). However, it included several other appliques with loops on the backside, which, along with further rosettes with loops, allowed scholars to reconstruct a completely different type of jewelry. The necklace form that they propose is derived from the luxurious neck ornaments worn by members of the elite of the Bosporan kingdom (Treister 2008, p. 217, Table 60, p. 107).

Another doubtful case is a find in Vyshneva Mohyla's central grave, where, among other appliques, 57 gold tubes, 77 beads, and a small number of gold pendants (only 4) of non-characteristic shapes were found in a severely looted chamber (Boltryk and Fialko 2007, Table 4, p. 72). Thus, due to the uncertain character of this assemblage, I do not include this example in my list of probable mesh-like jewelry finds. The authors of the original publication of the find believe that it presented elements of "removable complicated breast jewelry," i.e., mesh-like ornaments (Boltryk and Fialko 2007, pp. 72–73). Agreeing with their interpretation, Polin included this monument in his list of gold meshes (Bidzilia and Polin 2012, p. 295).

As is evident in our discussion, finds of gold tubes with beads and, sometimes, pendants are not rare in Scythian barrows. However, not all of these finds can be securely regarded as the remains of mesh-like or cross-chest decorations. For this reason, I have excluded many more doubtful examples from my list. For instance, in Khomyňa Mohyla, only 18 tubes, three beads, and 94 buttons were found in different locations of the looted tomb (Mozolevskyi 1973, pp. 231–233, Figure 38).

Another large collection of gold tubes and beads was found in the Skorobir burial ground near Bilsk hillfort (Poltava Oblast, Ukraine). This recent find provides new insights into the versatile usage of such applique sets. During the excavation of a partly looted grave in kurgan No. 2/2019 of the Skorobir necropolis, a number of tubes were recorded in situ in two parallel rows, which the principal researcher eventually reconstructed as the decor of a headband (Shramko 2024, p. 20, Figures 8–10).

Are there additional criteria for defining the shape of an ornament solely from its components if their placement in the grave was not adequately recorded? Although scholars have made many confident assumptions about the form of jewelry items based only on numerous disconnected elements of a particular form, I cannot share the same confidence. All elements of these mesh decorations demonstrably formed parts of other jewelry types (e.g., kurgan No. 1 in Try Braty group, kurgan No. 2/2019 of Skorobir, and Mohyla Ternivka) or were used as decorations on headdresses (in the case of the amphora or seed-shaped pendants) and other types of garments (for instance, as beads and buttons).

5. Who Wore the Jewelry Type?

At first, scholars had different opinions on who wore such decorations. Mikhail Rostovtzeff (1925, p. 451) believed that all the relevant examples known at that time were wrapped around the chest like gold threads and were regular features of women's costumes in the Dnieper region. Nadezhda Onayko agreed with such a reconstruction of the shape, referring to these jewelry pieces as neck decorations and viewing them exclusively as parts of male costume (Onayko 1970, p. 43).

The collection of new data led to a consensus among scholars, according to which the cross-chest shape should be discounted as a plausible reconstruction. Most researchers believe that meshes were used as decoration by wealthy men and women (Mantsevich 1987, p. 62; Alekseev et al. 1991, p. 112; Yatsenko 2006, p. 71; Boltryk and Fialko 2007, p. 73; Bidzilia and Polin 2012, p. 295). Based on the find from grave No. 2 in barrow No. 21 in the Rohachik burial mound group, Boltryk and Fialko (2007, Table 5, p. 73) noted that children might also have worn meshes. However, interpreting a 16-year-old female from the Scythian period as a child seems unfounded. In addition, in the grave that Boltryk and Fialko studied, the small number of tubes and numerous pendants that were found indicate the presence of another type of decoration, distinct from the mesh, since the assemblage did not include enough tubes (only 18 items) to form even one row of four rhombuses (each consisting of at least four tubes) and contained too many pendants (11 items).

Analyzing the 16 cases described in this study (Table 1), we confirm this hypothesis, with additional clarification concerning the shape of the decoration. A new study of the finds has shown that, in five graves containing the jewelry type, the sets belonged to male individuals and, in nine graves, they belonged to females. Interestingly, the woman buried in one royal kurgan, Chortomlyk, possessed not one but three sets of mesh-like jewelry found in a special chamber where her other clothes were placed (Table 1: No. 2–4). A probable correlation seems to exist between the shape of the decoration and the owner's sex, which is clear from the two cases where the exact find spot of the appliques was recorded in two male graves (Solokha and Seven Brothers). In both instances, the sets were arranged in a row, characteristic of the cross-chest form, whereas in two female tombs (Chortomlyk and Meloitopol), the tubes were arranged in rhomboids and triangles, indicating that the item was of mesh-like shape.

6. When, Where, and Why Was This Jewelry Popular?

In discussing when the decorations were used, we should emphasize yet again that the numerous tubes, beads, and pendants can only sometimes be firmly associated with mesh-like or cross-chest ornaments. However, based on the number and combination of appliques of specific types, and the places where they were found in the graves, we can point to at least 16 recorded cases of these ornaments (Table 1).

The earliest graves with a recorded set of appliques date from the middle of the 5th to the beginning of the 4th century BCE (Seven Brothers kurgan No. 2, Solokha side grave, and Pischyn kurgan No. 2). In the first half of the 4th century, Berdianskyi, Haimanova Mohyla, and Mala Lepetykha kurgan No. 9 were erected. Most barrows, namely, Chortomyk, Diiv, Melitopol, Ohuz, and Mastugino First barrow, are dated to around the middle and second half of the 4th century BCE. The latest find of these appliques comes from the Luhova Mohyla barrow, built around the end of the third quarter or the beginning of the last quarter of the 4th century BCE.

Geographically, most of these finds belong to the steppe to the north of the Black Sea. Only two of the burials were located in kurgans of the Forest-Steppe (Pischyn and Mastugino First barrow). However, strong evidence exists to associate the people buried in those two kurgans with representatives of the Scythian elite or their descendants (Babenko 2005, pp. 189, 197; Guliaev 2019). Interestingly, Pischyn kurgan No. 2 belonged to the early group, and Mastugino First barrow is one of the latest kurgans with such jewelry.

Thus, members of the Scythian elite¹⁴ of both sexes used at least two types of ornament for practically the entire 4th century BCE. Unfortunately, there is still insufficient data to explain why such shoulder jewelry sets became popular among Scythians, especially given that this “fashion statement” was not illustrated in iconographic sources.

7. Who Made This Jewelry?

Scholars have not reached a consensus on the question of goldsmithing craft in Scythian society (see an overview here: Lifantii 2023, pp. 1–2). Only the metalwork commonly referred to as Greco-Scythian is widely accepted to have been produced by Greek artisans. In other cases where simple techniques are applied to the goldwork and where the style is not strictly “Greek,” we should consider the real possibility of local Scythian production (for further arguments in favor of local Scythian goldsmithing, see Lifantii 2023, pp. 3–11).

One can note that mesh-like and cross-chest jewelry is a type of adornment known only from Scythian kurgans. In addition, the technical level of the jewelry is quite average, featuring a range of techniques that include hammering, embossing, chasing, and bending the gold leaf; twisting gold strips into a wire; and the final assembling of the product by way of soldering—all of which were used to create the tubes, pendants, and beads of the jewelry under consideration. Regarding the sets from Berdianskyi and Mala Lepetykha kurgans (Figure 2: 4) that the author has studied *de visu*, the manner of their execution is not very neat. There are many negligent details, such as poorly polished joints in the wire chains and at the edges of folded plaques. Many pendants from the Berdianskyi kurgan were made by reshaping lion mask appliques (Figure 2: 5), as is evident from the many wrinkles at the plaques’ seams. The reuse of the appliques is also demonstrated by the fact that no other pendants with a zoomorphic ornament of this type are known to me in the corpus of Scythian and Greco-Scythian metalwork of the northern Black Sea area. In certain instances, the pendants were decorated with filigree, a feature that, with the present evidence, does not appear to have been familiar to contemporary Scythian jewelers in the region. This detail suggests that Scythian jewelers might have reused pendants initially made by Greek artisans.

8. Conclusions

Based on the available evidence from materials recorded in situ and a comparative analysis of the jewelry’s design components, we can draw the following conclusions. Firstly,

there was not a single mesh-like attire type that contained similar sets of elements, but there were at least two or more: the mesh-like (Figures 3 and 5; Figure 6: 1, 3–4) and the cross-chest variant (Figure 4: 1–2; Figure 6: 2, 5). However, the reconstruction of the actual shape of these ornaments on the basis of the aforementioned data is complicated. Secondly, we can conclude that the decorations were probably sewn on a firm support made of fabric. Lastly, the previously proposed hypothesis, according to which these two types of complex ornaments were worn by both women and men, is undoubtedly correct even if the presence of the adornments in women's graves is numerically preponderant. In five cases, cross-chest ornaments were probably found buried with male remains (Solokha, Berdianskyi, Mastyugino First barrow, Seven Brothers kurgan No. 2, and a Luhova Mohyla side northeastern grave). However, to date, we have no reliable anthropological analysis of the skeletal remains in three of the six named cases.

As for the production of this type of jewelry, considering all the above technical observations, we emphasize the high probability of local Scythian production.

In most cases, the specific configurations into which the sets of appliques were arranged cannot be reconstructed with complete certainty. The two instances where rhomboid (Chortomlyk) and triangular (Melitopol) rows of gold tubes and beads seemed to derive from large meshes do not provide sufficient evidence for the reconstructions that have previously circulated in the literature. In any case, such reconstructions amount, in most instances, to little more than “a significant hypothetical assumption” (Klochko and Vasina 2017, 162) that may further confuse our view of a Scythian ceremonial costume and Scythian material culture in general.

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Notes

¹ Сітка or сітчаста прикраса in Ukrainian and сетка or сетчатое украшение in Russian languages.

² Widespread garment appliques in the form of a small hemisphere with an even smaller loop on the backside gained this name in Scythian archaeology.

³ Also known as Alexandropol kurgan.

⁴ In most cases, there were no anthropological studies on skeletons. When assumptions on sex were made based on the burial inventory or when there were no clear indications in favor of a male or female in the anthropological study, I added the “?” symbol. When the anthropologist calculated the age, I added it to this column.

⁵ According to Ivan Zabelin's excavation records, there were initially 102 such buttons. However, only 99 of them are now accounted for in the Hermitage collection (see Alekseev et al. 1991, pp. 208–9).

⁶ Originally, 205 such buttons were recorded (see Alekseev et al. 1991, p. 198).

⁷ Originally, 100 items were recorded (see Alekseev et al. 1991, p. 198).

⁸ In most cases, there were no anthropological studies on skeletons. When assumptions on sex were made based on the burial inventory or when there were no clear indications in favor of a male or female in the anthropological study, I added the “?” symbol. When the anthropologist calculated the age, I added it to this column.

⁹ According to the excavation report, the find should consist of 17 items. However, only 14 items are now preserved in the M. F. Sumtsov Kharkiv Historical Museum (see Babenko 2005, p. 140).

¹⁰ However, on Figure 186 by Otchet (1918) (see Figure 4: 2), which Veselovskiy addressed, we can clearly see a depiction of the so-called moose-ram and not two animals. According to Rostovtzeff (1925, p. 420), the depiction was of a mountain goat.

¹¹ She used the terms neck or breast attire while describing Thracian breastplates (Mantsevich 1948, pp. 72–75).

¹² There are known cases of ancient Egyptian bead-net dresses dating to the 3rd millennium BCE in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (No. 27.1548.1; 33.1020.1) and in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London (No. UC17743-1), but they were made with faience and, therefore, cannot be relevant examples of such nets that were used without being sewn onto the fabric. Even in the case of Egyptian bead-net dresses, there is, in fact, a discussion on whether the bead nets were sewn onto the fabric.

¹³ Also sometimes translated as the Three Brothers group.

- ¹⁴ Although I should note that Seven Brothers barrow No. 2 is widely accepted as a burial representative of the local Sindi population (Goroncharovskiy 2014, p. 553), it still has a solid connection to Scythian culture, as is clear from its costume decorations, jewelry, and other grave goods. Thus, in light of the absence of cross-chest ornaments in other Sindi kurgans, we can infer that this decoration, for some reason, gained popularity only among Scythian populations.

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