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ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

THE MEDUSA-GORGON OF MERENI (REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA) AND HER MYTH

Abstract: Based on an important discovery at Mereni (Republic of Moldova) – a massive mirror with a handle depicting the Gorgon-Medusa (Argive type) – we propose a critical reassessment of interpretations of the images of Medusa and the *gorgoneion* (the severed head) as archaic apotropaic symbols. The mirror was unearthed in a rich Scythian burial associated with an adult woman, very likely a shaman, alongside a contemporaneous grave interpreted as that of a male warrior. The handle bears the face of the Gorgon, a choice seemingly intended to repel malevolent forces that might endanger the object's owner. Beyond its aesthetic value as a toiletry item, the mirror may have held religious significance, serving as an attribute of priestly status – an interpretation supported by the presence of a divination kit, a whip, a horse, and other ritual paraphernalia found in the same funerary context. Thus, the burial at Mereni, dated to the late 5th century BC, offers a compelling opportunity to revisit the world of shamans, the myth of Medusa, and its distant reverberations far beyond the Mediterranean cultural sphere that gave rise to it.

Keywords: *Mereni burials, Gorgon-Medusa, mirror, Scythians, social identities.*

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THE MYTH OF MEDUSA AND THE NOMADIC SOCIETIES

The myth of Medusa, one of the three Gorgon sisters, evolved over the course of Antiquity. In its most widespread form, Medusa is the only mortal Gorgon, capable of turning onlookers to stone with her gaze. Though sometimes portrayed as a terrifying monster with snake hair, she was also depicted in early myths as a beautiful maiden transformed by Athena after Poseidon violated her in the goddess's temple. Perseus, aided by Athena and Hermes, ultimately beheads her using his shield as a mirror. From Medusa's blood sprang Pegasus and Chrysaor, and her severed head – still endowed with apotropaic power – became a protective emblem on Athena's aegis and on countless ancient objects.¹

Beyond the classical narrative, Medusa has deep prehistoric roots and may descend from Bronze Age or even Neolithic fertility and nature goddesses. Some scholars see her as related to the Minoan snake goddess or the Great Mother archetype. At the same time, early artistic representations

¹ All studies devoted to representations of Medusa inevitably address the mythological dimension of the character: ANDRES 2020; BRESSON 1996; DUBOIS 1988; FROTHINGHAM 1911; GARBER/VICKERS 2003; LAZAROU/LIRITZIS 2022; PADGETT 2003; REEDER 1996; VERNANT 1985 (selective bibliography).

show her with a whole body, wings, or hybrid animal traits.² These forms reflect an archaic world of liminal female-animal beings and a patriarchal imagination that associated feminine power with danger. Throughout Antiquity, Medusa embodied both monstrosity and beauty, terror and protection. Nowadays interpretations vary widely: Freud viewed her as a symbol of castration anxiety,³ while feminist scholars such as P. DuBois interpret her as a figure of autonomous, ancient feminine power.⁴ Historians-anthropologists like J.-P. Vernant emphasize her ritual, mask-like nature and her role as a symbol of alterity, chaos, and sacred protection.⁵

Medusa is not merely a mythical monster but a profoundly archaic symbol whose meanings – apotropaic, religious, social, and aesthetic – long predate the classical narrative. Early representations preserve traces of a prehistoric nature and fertility deity, a figure connected with animal mastery and the control of natural forces. After her mythic decapitation, her severed head acquired a new existence: the *gorgoneion* became a protective emblem whose terrifying gaze functioned as a permanent shield. Her longevity stems from this dual nature: death and regeneration, terror and protection, a symbolic resilience that enabled her image to circulate far beyond the Mediterranean world. Archaic attributes made her exceptionally adaptable to cultures with strong shamanic and animistic traditions. Within nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppe, where anthropomorphic divine imagery is rare, the deliberate adoption of Medusa is striking.

Although it remains uncertain whether Scythians knew the complete Greek myth, the archaic, protective, and nature-bound character of Medusa probably resonated with their own belief systems. Her hybrid form, liminal power, and ability to ward off danger aligned with nomadic concepts of spiritual guardianship and shamanic authority.⁶ Objects bearing her image – particularly mirrors, ornaments, and elite grave goods – appear in Scythian and later Sarmatian contexts across the Black Sea region, the Pontic steppe, and the Great Hungarian Plain. These items were often associated with high-status women, suggesting that Medusa served as a marker of prestige, ritual competence,

² More than a century ago, A.L. Frothingham argued that Medusa was not originally a malevolent demon but a deity of nature and fertility, related to the archetype of the Great Mother (the Chthonic Mother / the Mistress of Animals / Cybele or Artemis-Mother). Only in the pre-Hellenic period, with religious transformations and the crystallization of the Olympian pantheon, did this archaic figure acquire a subordinate status. From this perspective, the myth of the Gorgon would represent an early, extensive, and meaningful mythological core linked to the forces of nature and distinct from its later canonical image. At the same time, its artistic expression would have incorporated influences from Egypt, Crete, the Hittite world, Assyria, and Asia Minor (FROTHINGHAM 1911).

³ FREUD 1955, 273-275.

⁴ DUBOIS 1988, 92.

⁵ VERNANT 1985, 36. J.-P. Vernant emphasizes that Gorgon is not a singular figure, but a multiple one, a divinity „of the mask *par excellence*”, always represented frontally, with an impassive face.: „Gorgô aussi est double, ou plutôt multiple, c'est la divinité au masque par excellence, elle est toujours présentée de face, le visage sans expression”.

⁶ The term „shaman” is used here in a broad, heuristic sense to refer to ritual specialists in ancient communities, whose roles likely combined healing, storytelling, mediation with the spirit world, and other communal functions.

and protection. Medusa thus operated as a cultural bridge: a foreign motif reinterpreted within nomadic symbolic frameworks, where she embodied both intimidation and guardianship. In deeply patriarchal environments, she became a protector of women, a figure whose lethal gaze targets men and whose image grants agency to its female bearers.

Across time, her iconography continued to evolve – from prehistoric deity to hybrid monster, from apotropaic emblem to modern symbol of female power. Today, Medusa endures as a deeply ambivalent and hybrid figure, simultaneously divine and monstrous, alluring and fearsome.⁷ Her gaze still captivates, demonstrating the extraordinary durability of a symbol capable of continual reinvention across cultures, including the nomadic worlds of the Eurasian steppe.

SCYTHIAN BURIALS NEAR MERENI

One of the most intriguing burials with an Argive-type mirror and a Medusa image is burial 7 of Mound 1 near the village of Mereni (Anenii Noi district, Republic of Moldova), excavated by Eugen Sava and Valentin Dergachev in 1987.⁸ The mound of the Mereni was located approximately 3.2 km east of the village, on the watershed of a high cape, 0.5 km southeast of the farm. The mound stood 1.2 meters above the ancient surface and measured approximately 35 meters in diameter. By the initiation of the excavations, the mound's surface had been ploughed to a depth of 0.4 metres, and a drainage trench had partially destroyed the southwestern part of the mound. Furthermore, the central part of the barrow was partially destroyed during the installation of a geodetic marker.

A total of 16 burials were discovered in the mound. Excavations revealed that the mound was erected in several stages, and the oldest burials date back to the Early Bronze Age – the Yamnaya culture (9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15). More recent burials included those of the Multi-cordoned ware (Babyné) culture (8 and 12) and the Sabatynivka culture (1, 5, and 6) of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. Burials 3 and 7 were associated with the Scythian culture and contained two oval patches of natural outcrop, 9-10 m long, 2.54 m wide, and up to 0.2-0.3 m thick, traced from the southwestern and northeastern sides of the burials. Judging by the profiles, both burials were made in the floors of the ancient mound where the extracted clay was recorded.

BURIAL WITH A MIRROR

Burial 7 (**Figs. 1-2**) was discovered 10.0 meters northwest of the centre, at a depth of 2.6 meters. At the level of the discovered contour, the spot was an irregularly oval-shaped mass of lumpy native clay, with oval patches of chernozem infill adjoining it at the extremities. Subsequent cleaning of the area revealed that the central portion corresponded

⁷ ANDRES 2020, 14.

⁸ ДЕРГАЧЕВ/ПОСТИКЭ/САВВА 1988, 3-5; ДЕРГАЧЕВ/САВА 2001-2002, 526-542.

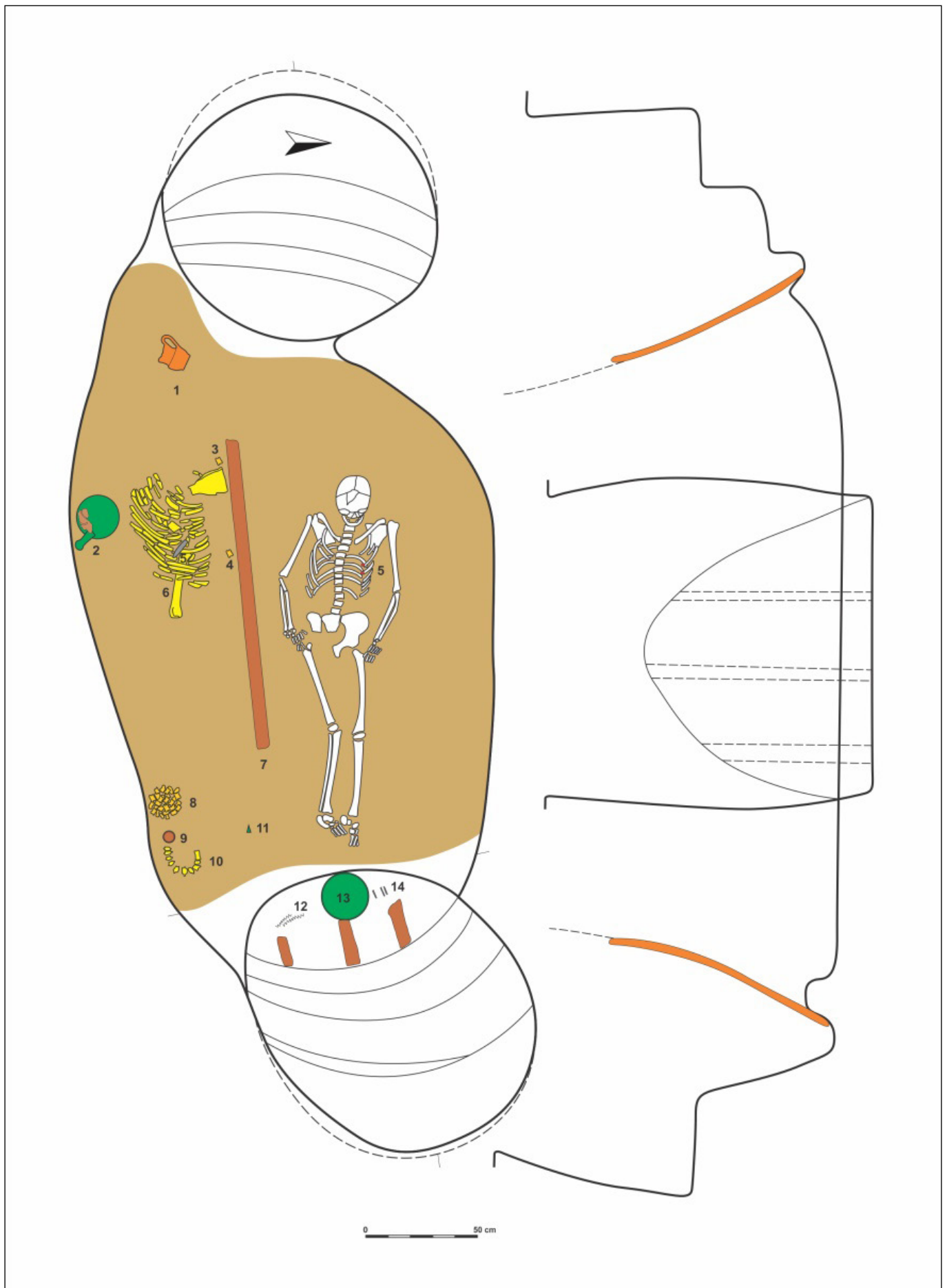


Fig. 1. Layout of burial 7 of barrow 1 near Mereni (redrawn according to the field documentation).



Fig. 2. Burial 7 of the barrow 1 near Mereni (photo by E. Sava).

to a burial chamber, irregularly oval in shape, with a maximum width of 1.9 metres and a length of 2.3 metres. The chamber's level floor was located at a depth of 4.0-4.10 metres from the datum point (the highest elevation of the mound at the time of excavation, as indicated by a geodetic marker installed in the centre). The walls of the chamber are vertical, with a slight widening at a height of 0.8 metres from the bottom, while the long axis is oriented east-west. The chamber was found to be filled with dense, lumpy clay from the virgin soil. Two oval pits were located at the extremities of the burial chamber to the east and west. The eastern pit, measuring 1.35×1.1 m, exhibited a bottom formed by two arched steps at depths of 3.5 and 3.8 m. The second step, 15 cm high, formed a narrow channel (10 cm wide) at its base. This channel, in turn, separated the entrance from the burial chamber through a narrow natural step (10 cm wide, 10 cm high). The "entrance" to the latter was sealed with three wooden planks, the ends of which rested on the channel. Decay from wooden planks was traced over a distance of 0.95 m. The entire entrance "room" was filled with homogeneous, fine-grained black soil.

A second "entrance" was located on the western side of the burial chamber. It was also circular in plan, with a diameter of 1.2 m. The western wall widened by 15 cm at the bottom. The bottom, in the form of a high step (3.50 m deep from the benchmark, 0.6 m high), transitioned into a narrow (15 cm) ditch and a natural step (10 cm high and 15 cm wide), which separated the described object from the burial chamber. On the wall facing the chamber, imprints of

vertically installed wooden planks up to 1.05 m high were traced, the ends of which rested on the ditch. It is evident that both described objects were excavated from the clay fill of the burial structure, have a secondary fill, and, in all likelihood, represent false entrances.

The deceased (an aged woman, according to field observations by V. Dergachev) was found in an extended position on her back, with her skull facing west (270°). Her upper limbs were held at a slight angle, with her elbows flexed, and her legs were extended, although the right leg was slightly flexed at the knee and positioned towards the left. The chamber floor exhibited signs of decayed bedding and ash. Furthermore, a narrow (5-8 cm wide) and long (approximately 1.8 m) strip of decayed wood (partition?) was observed to the right of the burial.

In the northeast corner of the chamber were the bones of an animal's coiled tail. In the central part of the chamber, closer to the southern wall, at the level of the skull and sternum, were horse bones, including the scapula and bones of one foreleg, as well as ribs arranged in anatomical order. Near the horse bones, just beneath the chamber wall, beneath a bronze mirror (**Fig. 3**), were small iron clamps bearing traces of decayed wood from an unknown object. They were made from a 2 mm diameter cord, folded into a rectangle (0.7×1.2 cm) or a square (0.9 cm on a side). Near the animal bones were small fragments of a wooden bowl, covered with a double zigzag bronze band up to 1.5 mm wide and less than 1 mm thick, of which individual fragments remained. A similar

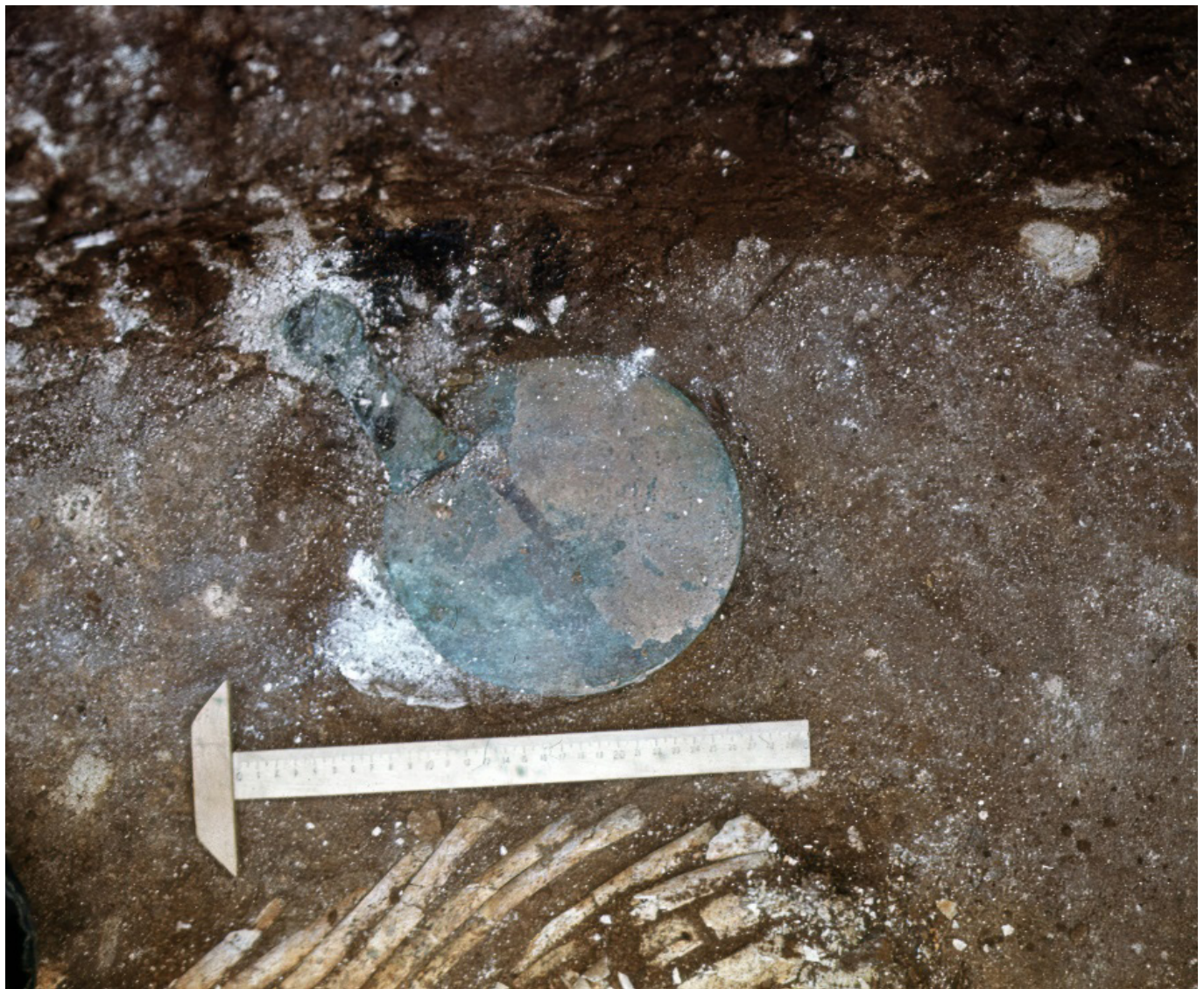


Fig. 3. Bronze mirror from Mereni in situ (photo by E. Sava).

zigzag double gold band, found 15-20 cm south of the bowl, apparently originated from the same object (**Fig. 5/10**). At the feet of the buried woman, 10-15 cm from the heel bones, fragments of three iron awls (heavily corroded) up to 4 mm in diameter were found. The awls were inserted into wooden handles, of which decay remained. The total length of one awl was 5.8 cm, the second 2.8 cm, and the third 3.2 cm (**Fig. 4/4**). In the northeastern corner of the chamber, in the clay fill, 1.1 m above the bottom of the chamber, a triangular arrowhead with a poorly defined bronze bushing 2.5 cm long was found (**Fig. 5/5**). On the ribs of the left half of the chest, two oval appliques made of gold foil were found, depicting lying animals (panthers?), measuring 1.2×0.8 cm (**Fig. 4/6**). On the reverse side of one of them, two rings for sewing to clothing are soldered; the second appliqué has one such ring. The sewn-in ring was broken and replaced with a 1 mm diameter hole (**Fig. 5/9**).

The remains of an iron knife with a straight blade, a humped back, and a short handle with two holes, one of which retained an iron rivet that held the wooden handle, were found on the horse bones. The knife's total length was 9.6 cm, the blade length was 8 cm, the maximum width

was 2 cm, and the back thickness was 0.4 cm (**Fig. 4/4**). A cluster of 29 astragals (some of which had disintegrated) was discovered under the southern wall, near the remains of a wooden bowl (**Fig. 4/5**). Some of them showed visible signs of processing, while others had sawed-off side edges. Another astragalus was located between the human skeleton and the sacrificial animal's bones, closer to the latter. Another was located near the animal's shoulder blade, 0.4 m west of the previous one.

In the southwest corner of the chamber, a small jug with a simple loop-shaped handle protruding above the mouth lay reclining. It was made of clay mixed with chamotte (**Fig. 5/1-2**). The vessel has a grayish-black mottled surface, 11.6 cm high, with a mouth diameter of 9 cm and a base diameter of 7 cm. At the foot of the deceased, 10-15 cm from the heel bones, a flattened-hemispherical bronze bowl made from a bronze sheet was discovered (**Fig. 4/1**). The bowl walls are approximately 1 mm thick, and the rim is slightly thickened (2-3.5 mm). Two narrow grooves are engraved on the outside, under the rim. The bowl is 5.2-5.5 cm high and has a mouth diameter of 20.8 cm.



Fig. 4. Grave goods of the burial 7 of the barrow 1 near Mereni: 1 – bronze bowl, 2 – fragment of the wooden bowl, 3 – fragment of the leather pouch, 4 – iron knife, 5 – knuckle bones, 6 – gold appliques.

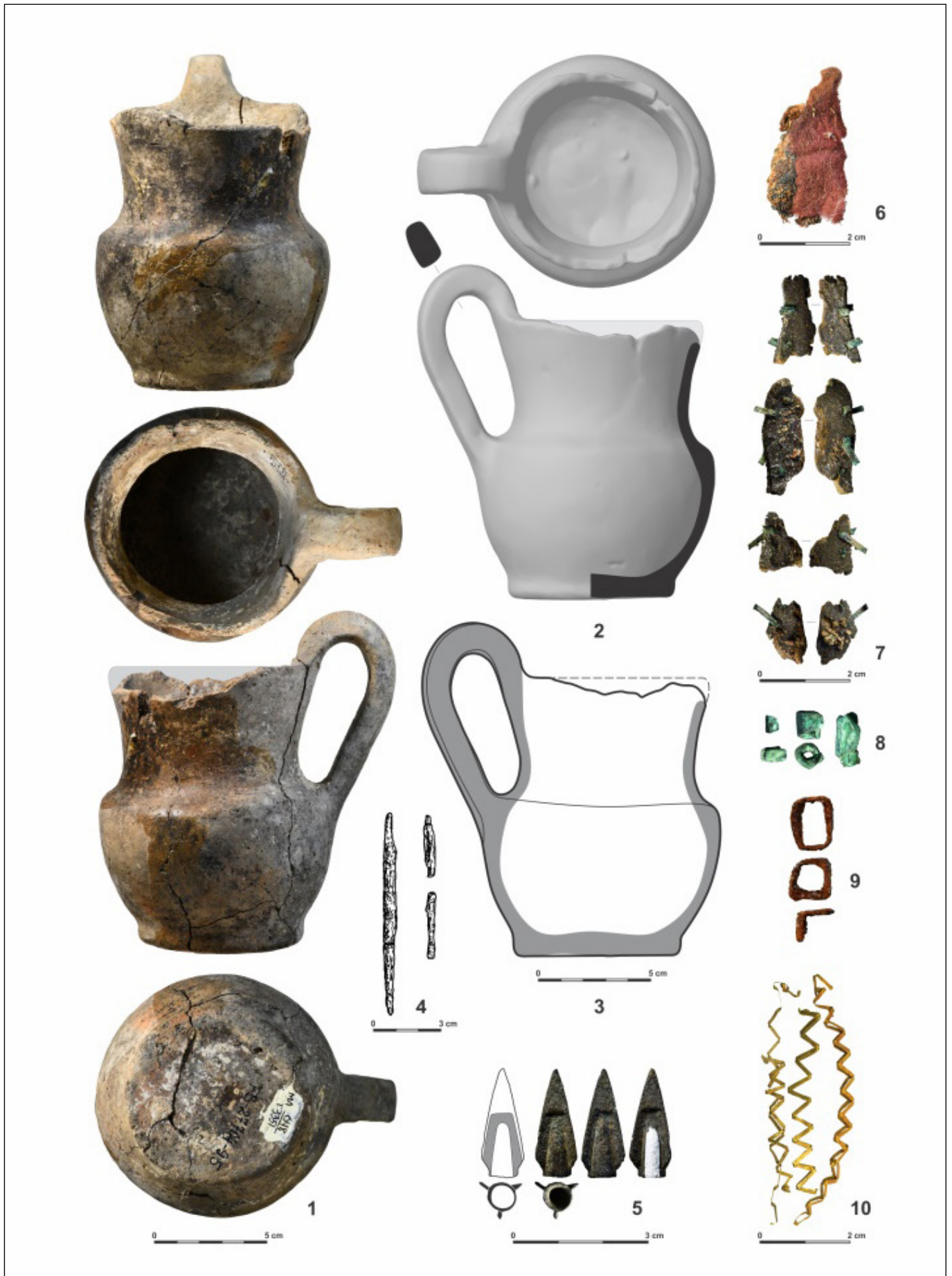


Fig. 5. Grave goods of the burial 7 of the barrow 1 near Mereni: 1-3 – clay vessel, 4 – iron needles, 5 – bronze arrowhead, 6 – fragment of the painted textile, 7 – fragments of the wooden bowls with bronze elements, 8 – bronze beads, 9 – iron bracket, 10 – gold decoration.

MIRROR WITH MEDUSA

To the south of the sacrificial bones, just beneath the chamber wall, lay a large bronze mirror with a bronze handle (Fig. 3). The disk, 2 mm thick and 19 cm in diameter, was rounded and concave-convex in cross-section. The handle, 12.4

cm long and 2.5-3.4 cm wide, was elongated and trapezoidal, extending into a round medallion 4 cm in diameter (Figs. 6-7). The round medallion bore a relief image of the Gorgon-Medusa with embossed elements (eyes, mouth, ears), and on the reverse side, a roughly scratched solar design consisting



Fig. 6. Bronze mirror from Mereni, burial 7.

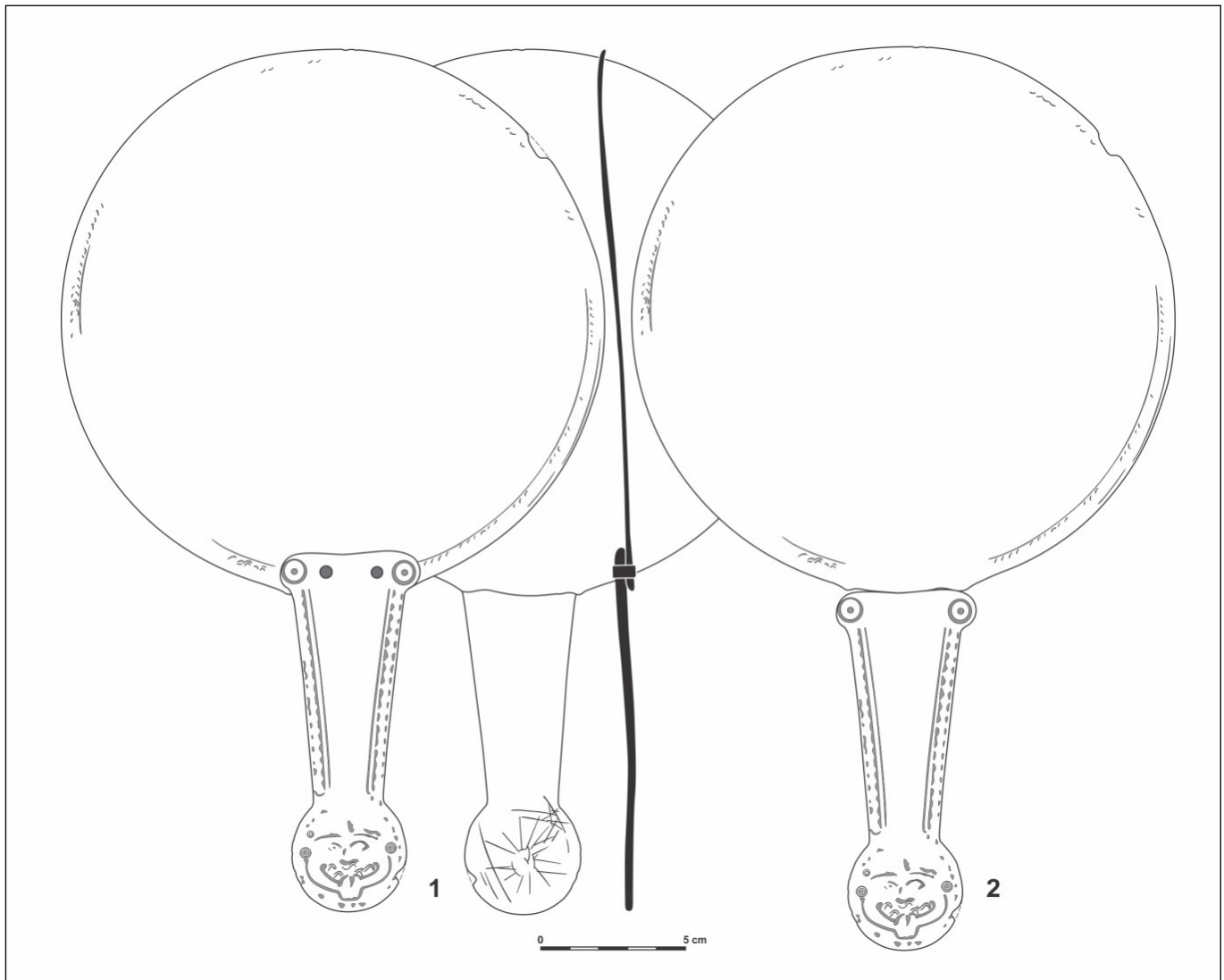


Fig. 7. Bronze mirror from Mereni (1) and its reconstruction (2).

of a circle with rays radiating from it. In ancient times, most likely during the deceased's lifetime, the mirror had been broken and then repaired: the handle was separated from the disk, the fractures were ground smooth, and the mirror was secured with two iron rivets, which had fallen apart by the time of excavation. After restoration, it was discovered that a relief "wicker" ornament was carved along the edge of the disk, bounded by two concentric circles. A leather pouch, of which individual fragments remain, was located beneath the mirror. The reverse side of the mirror shows visible contact points with the pouch, suggesting that the mirror was laid with the medallion depicting Medusa facing upward. It contained approximately 300 grams of chalk powder (used for polishing the mirror) and cereal grains, and small fabric fragments were preserved near the pouch.

It would seem that burial 7 from Mereni, based on the grave goods, can be attributed to the Middle Scythian period. However, it cannot be classified into any of the three characteristic groups – "warriors", "horsemen" and "cremated", according to I.V. Bruyako.⁹ The researcher himself proposed dating this assemblage to the late 6th –

early 5th centuries BC based on a bronze bowl and a bronze mirror.¹⁰ E. Teleagă is not so sure about the dating of the bronze bowl by, and attributed it to the late 5th century BC.¹¹ These dating are also slightly refined by the golden oval plaques of the Nymphaeum-Lyubymivka type (according to A. R. Kantorovich), which were widespread from the second quarter of the 5th century BC¹² or within the end of the 5th – first quarter of the 4th century BC.¹³

The mirror from Mereni, which features Argive-style projections on the handle and relief decoration on the shaft, belongs to the "mixed" group of the of the Argive-Corinthian style.¹⁴ Besides the projections, the mirror lacks a suspension hole in the medallion and decorated with a *gorgoneion* instead, similar to those found on Corinthian mirrors.¹⁵ A small group of mirrors featuring Argive-style projections at the handle base, terminating in a *gorgoneion*, is well documented across territories north and west of the Black Sea. The closest

⁹ БРУЯКО 2005, 160-161.

¹⁰ БРУЯКО 2005, 164.

¹¹ TELEAGĂ 2008, 454.

¹² КАНТОРОВИЧ 2022, 30.

¹³ БАБЕНКО 2012, 105-107, 113.

¹⁴ LAMB 1969, 126.

¹⁵ PAYNE 1931, fig. 102.

parallels to the Mereni specimen include mirrors with a *gorgoneion* from Gura Văii,¹⁶ barrow 7 of the Elizavetovskaya (Elizavetinskaya) burial ground,¹⁷ barrow 3 of the Staikin Verkh burial ground near Oksyntyntsi (Zalutske),¹⁸ and burial 10 of 1913 from Olbia.¹⁹ N. A. Onayko notes that such mirrors became widespread in the second half of the 6th century BC,²⁰ with production attributed either to Olbia²¹ or the wider Mediterranean region.²² Z. A. Bilimovich identifies the earliest mirror in this group as the specimen from burial 10 in 1913 at Olbia, dated to the late 6th or the first half of the 5th century BC.²³ Ceramic assemblages indicate that burial mound 7 from Elizavetovskaya dates no earlier than the early 5th century BC.²⁴ The burial from mound 3 near Oksyntyntsi is similarly dated to the first half of the 5th century BC, based on grave goods such as iron bridles with S-shaped cheekpieces, women's jewelry from the late 6th to early 5th century BC, and a Solokha-type *akinakes* handle,²⁵ which is one of the earliest assemblages with a Solokha type.²⁶ Furthermore, given the deceased's advanced age and the extensive repair and use of the mirror, a much later date for burial 7 at Mereni can be assumed. Additional support for this hypothesis is provided by the neighbouring burial 3, which, judging by its stratigraphy, construction, and orientation, was constructed almost simultaneously with burial 7.

¹⁶ GRUMEZA et al. 2025.

¹⁷ МИЛЛЕР 1910: 98, fig. 5, 10.

¹⁸ ОНАЙКО 1966: 63, cat. 223, pl. 19: 4; ИЛЬИНСКАЯ 1968: 28-29, pl. 8: 9.

¹⁹ ФАРМАКОВСКИЙ 1914, pl. 11; СКУДНОВА 1988, 127-128, cat. 199; TREISTER 2003, Abb. 8; TROFIMOVA 2007, 112, cat. 30). In relation to mirrors featuring a *gorgoneion*, reference is made to an item in the Kherson Museum (inventory number 16708), described as "a fragment of a bronze mirror with a relief image of the upper part of a lotus flower and rosettes" (Онайко 1966, 57, cat. 27). This artifact was reportedly found near the village of Kardashynka, although N. A. Onayko provides an erroneous location. Unfortunately, the item remains unpublished (СКУДНОВА 1988, 25; КУЗНЕЦОВА 2002, 264).

²⁰ ОНАЙКО 1966, 19.

²¹ ФАРМАКОВСКИЙ 1914, 27-30, pl. 10, 3; 15; БИЛИМОВИЧ 1976, 40.

²² STUDNICZKA 1919, 2.

²³ БИЛИМОВИЧ 1976, 40.

²⁴ БРАШИНСКИЙ 1976, 98; ВАХТИНА 2018, 332.

²⁵ ИЛЬИНСКАЯ 1968, 75-76; ТОПАЛ 2021, 287.

²⁶ ТОПАЛ 2024, 31.

BURIAL OF A WARRIOR

Burial 3 was discovered 6.5 meters northwest of the centre, at a depth of 2.06 meters. The structure had an elongated suboval shape and was oriented west to east. It comprised a burial chamber 2.35 meters long and 1.12 meters wide, containing the skeleton and grave goods, and two separate, longitudinally adjoining pits. The deceased (a young male, according to field observations by V. Dergachev) was located in the center of the chamber, lying supine in an extended position, with his head facing east. His right arm was extended alongside his body, the left arm slightly bent at the elbow, with the hands near the pelvis. His right leg

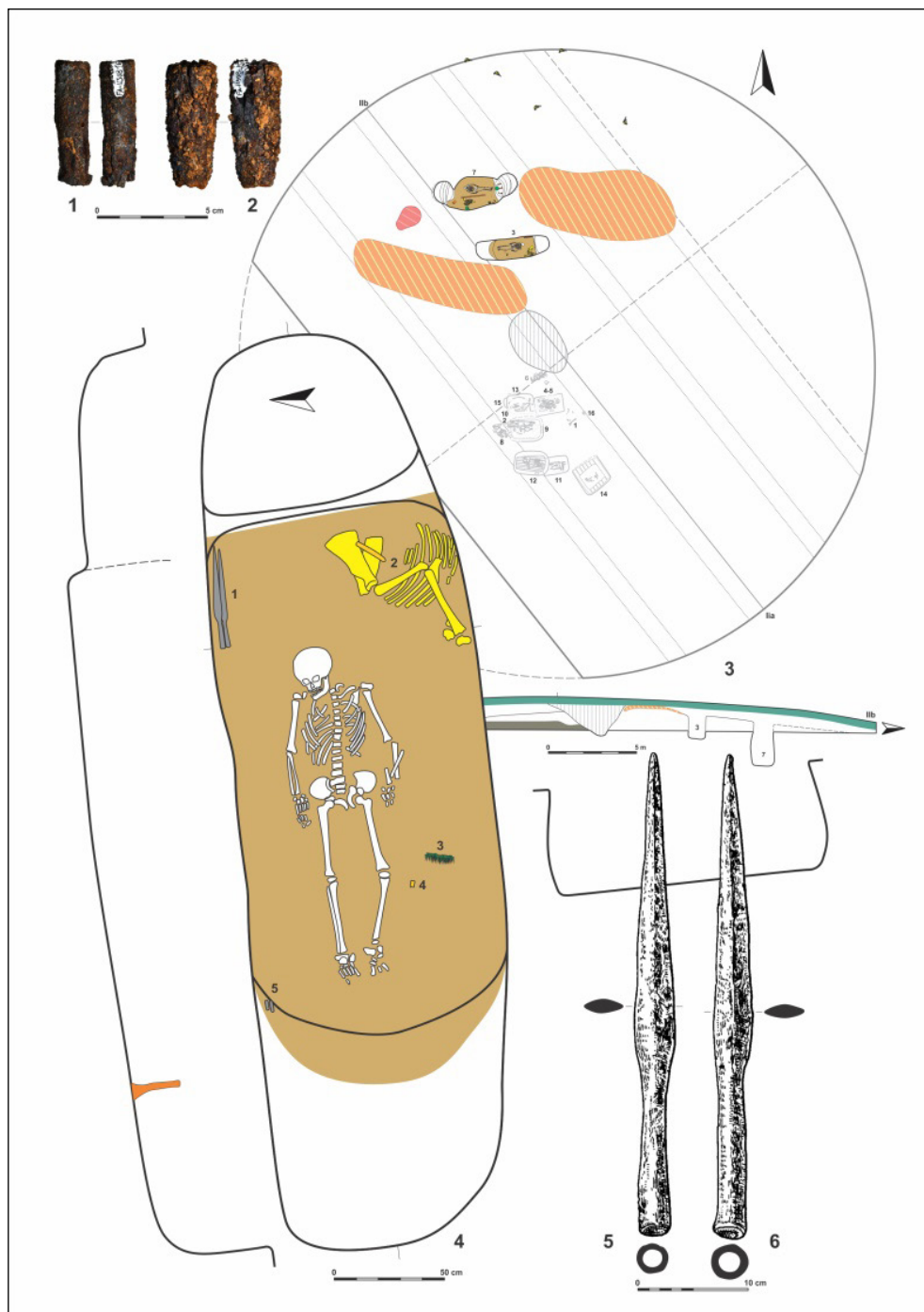


Fig. 8. Barrow 1 near Mereni and burial 3 (3-4) (redrawn according to the field documentation) and its grave goods (1-2, 5-6).

was extended, the left leg slightly bent at the knee, but the foot bones were close together (Fig. 8). Faint remains of decayed dark-brown bedding, interspersed with white dust, were found across the entire floor of the burial chamber and partially along the edge of the bottom of the western chamber. Sacrificial horse bones, including leg bones and part of a sternum, were found in the southeastern corner of the chamber. A louse with cut-off sides was found 10 cm south of the left knee joint at the bottom of the chamber. Iron spearheads with narrow laurel blades, 44 and 43.5 cm long, were found in the northeastern corner of the chamber, with their points pointing east (Fig. 8/5-6). Under the northern wall, at the very edge of the western step, two heavily corroded iron spearheads, 5.5 cm long, were found. Next to and partially on a horse's shoulder blade lay an iron knife with a bone handle. The blade was almost completely lost, and the handle consisted of two bone plates fastened to the knife's flat handle with four iron rivets. The total length of the preserved fragment is 15 cm, the blade width at the base is 1.9 cm, the handle length is 13.2 cm, the width is 1.4-2 cm, and the thickness is 0.8 cm.

Between the southern wall of the chamber and the knee joint, 62 bronze triangular arrowheads were discovered, "lying in a pile", with the tips pointing west (Fig. 9-10). A fairly wide diversity distinguishes the quiver set: both morphological (length from 2.1 to 3.4 cm, weight from 0.7 to 2.7 g) and typological. The majority of the arrowheads are trilobed and triangular, some of them equipped with cast or scratched marks. According to M.N. Daragan, the arrowheads from this set belong to the "cross-shaped marks" horizon of the second half of the 5th century BC.²⁷ In addition, a small number of arrowheads are of the "tower-shaped" form (Fig. 10/36-37) from the first to third quarter of the 5th century BC.²⁸

Moreover, both Scythian burials from the barrow near Mereni represents a completely original type of burial structure – a catacomb with two entrances.²⁹ Perhaps, such an original design was guided by the idea that certain funerary actions could be carried out through different entrances.³⁰ According to the observations of S.V. Polin and M.N. Daragan, the dates of burials in catacombs with two or more entrances fall within the range of the middle of the 5th century BC – the third quarter of the 4th century BC.³¹ Considering the relative synchronicity of burials 3 and 7 (within a few years, maximum one decade, according to I.V. Bruyako.³² and the chronology of the bulk of the burial inventory, the most probable dating of the assemblage with the mirror seems to be the second half of the 5th century BC or, instead, the end of the century.

CONCLUSIONS

The two Scythian burials from the Mereni barrow offer a unique case study for examining how Greek mythological imagery – particularly the *gorgoneion* – was reinterpreted

within the symbolic, ritual, and social universe of Eurasian nomads. Although both graves belong to the same chronological horizon and share similar funerary architecture, their structure and inventory reveal two profoundly distinct social identities: a „warrior” and a (possibly) shamanic female specialist. Their association within a single mound suggests not only synchronicity but also a meaningful social relationship, perhaps reflecting complementary roles within the same community.

Burial 7, that of the elderly woman, is remarkable for its complexity and the concentration of symbolic artefacts: the Argive-type mirror with a Medusa handle, the leather pouch with chalk, clay, wooden and bronze bowls, the whip, the divination set of astragali, horse skeleton, and the „false” entrances that structure the chamber like a ritual microcosm. Together, these elements strongly evoke the toolkit of a Scythian ritual practitioner, whose functions combined divination, healing, communication with spirits, and protection of the community. This evidence aligns closely with ethnographic and archaeological models of female shamanic authority in steppe societies (Diagram 1/a). Within this framework, the presence of the Medusa motif becomes more than an imported luxury object: it acquires a distinctly apotropaic and ritual significance. The

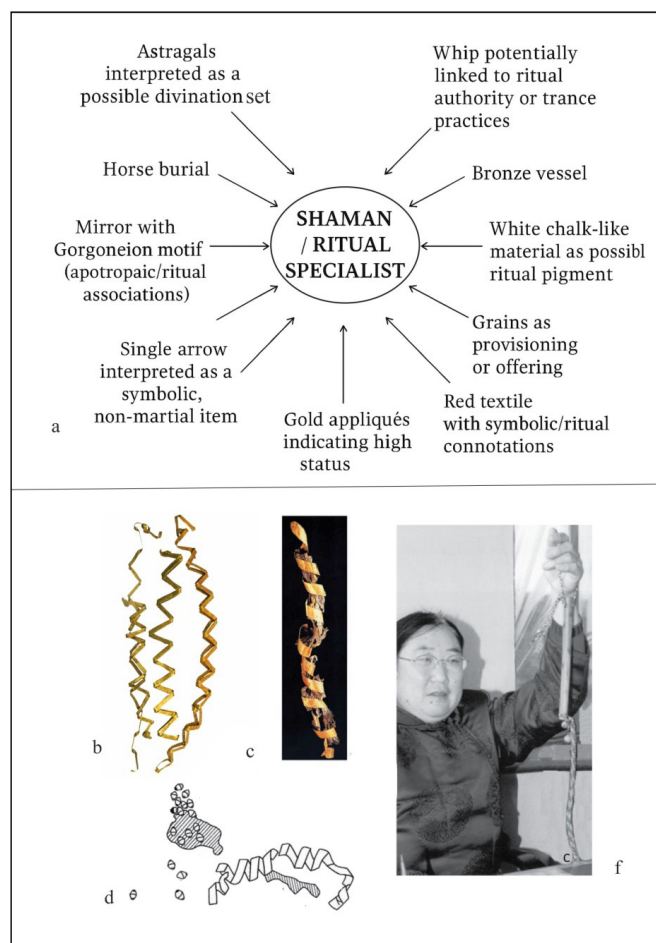


Diagram 1. a. Schematic overview of attributes associated with a ritual specialist; b. The gold foil from burial 7 in Mereni, c. Issyk (Esik) Kurgan; d. Tovsta Mogila; f. Daur female shaman with whip (after HASANOV 2014, Fig. 1; HASANOV 2016, Fig. 5 – with further bibliography).

²⁷ ДАРАГАН 2019, 161-168; ПОЛИН/ДАРАГАН 2021, 273.
²⁸ ТОПАЛ/ДЕРМЕНЏИ 2023, 134.
²⁹ СИННИКА 2007, 15; ПОЛИН/ДАРАГАН 2021, 254-258.
³⁰ ПОЛИН/ДАРАГАН 2021, 289.
³¹ ПОЛИН/ДАРАГАН 2021, 289.
³² БРУЯКО 2005, 164.

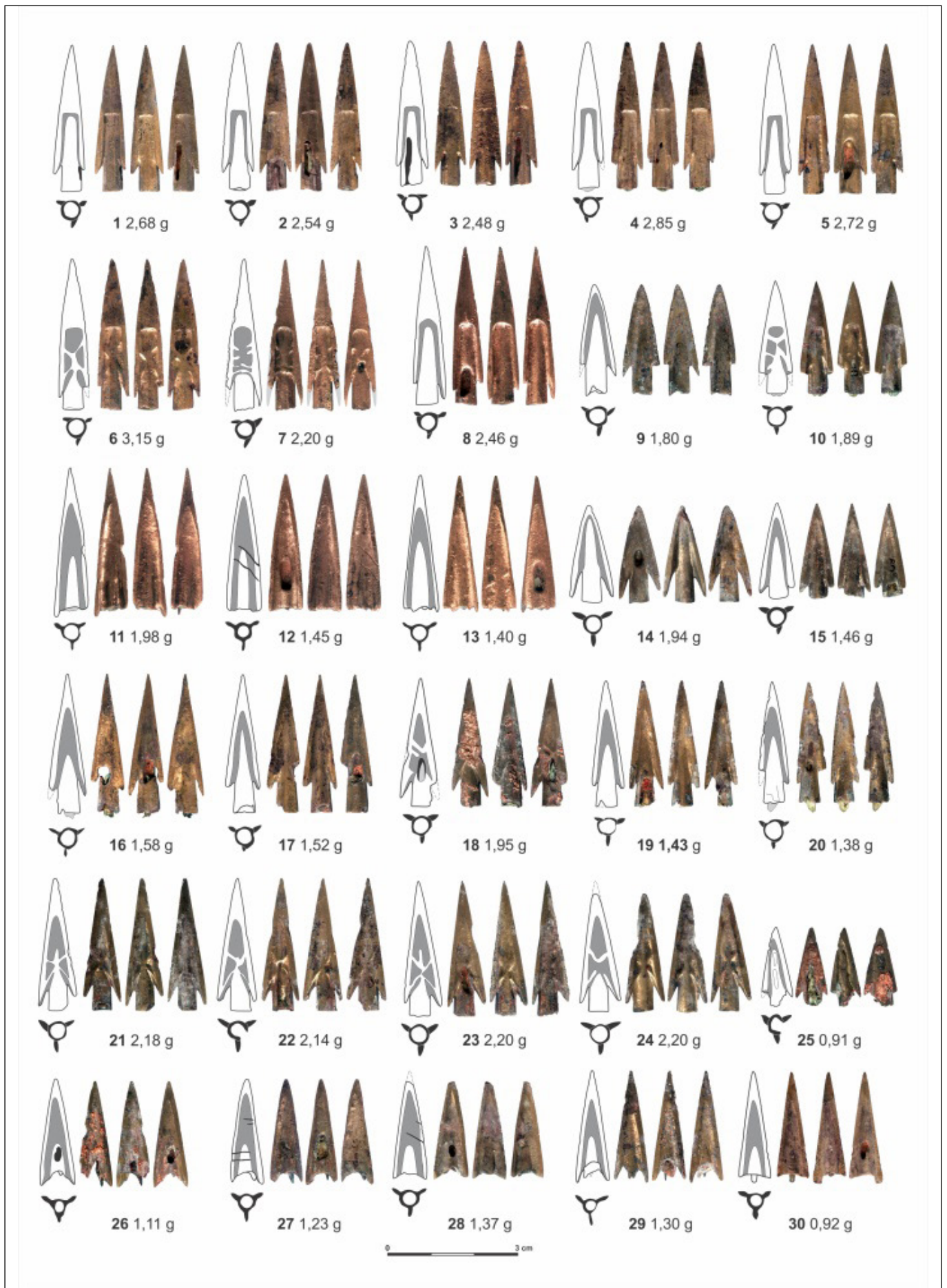


Fig. 9. Bronze arrowheads from burial 3 near Mereni.

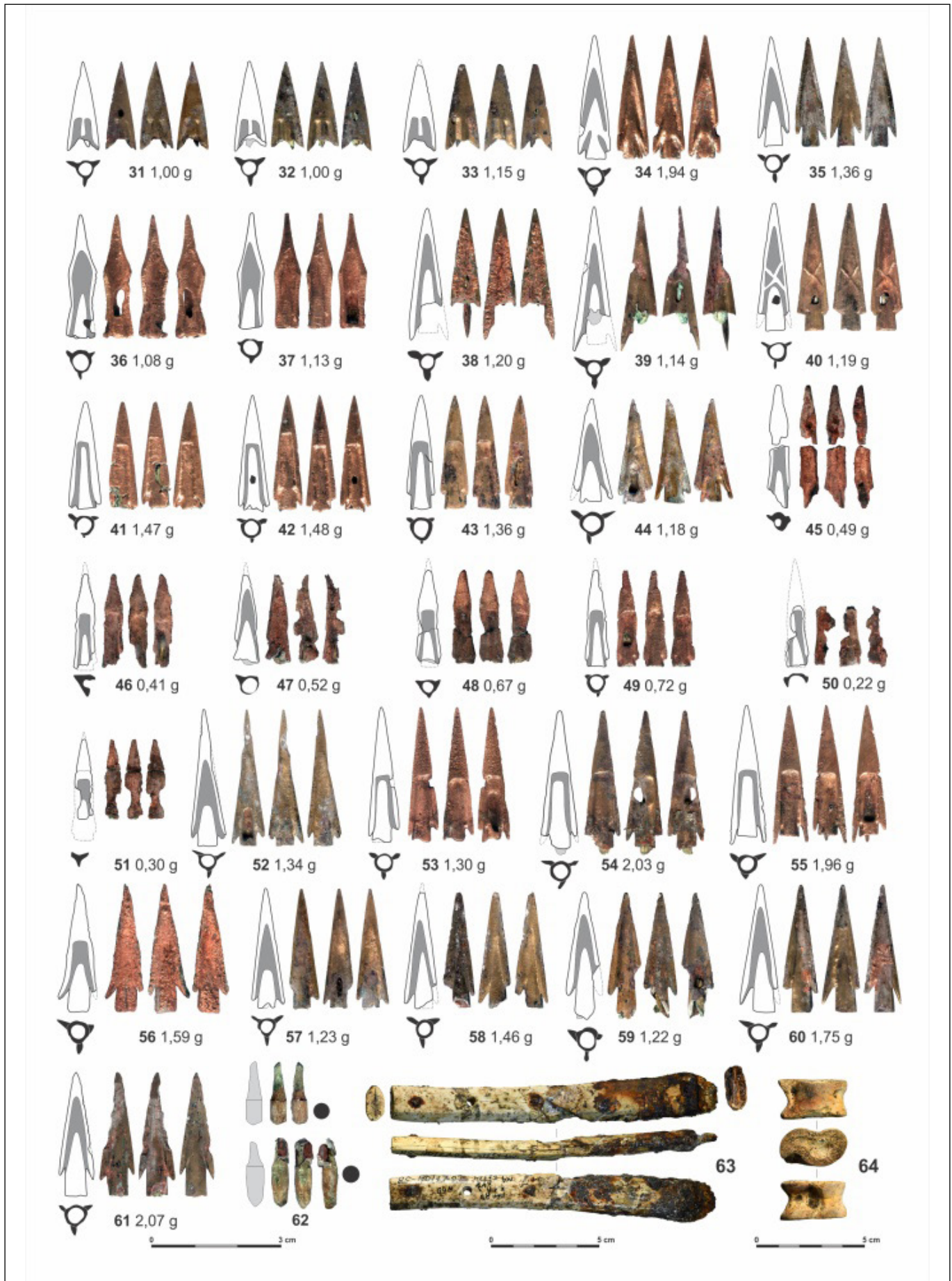


Fig. 10. Bronze arrowheads from burial 3 of barrow 1 near Mereni (31-61), wooden shafts (62), iron knife with a bone handle (63) and knuckle bone (64).

mirror's orientation, the deliberate placement of the Medusa medallion upward, and the signs of long-term use and repair indicate not only personal value but also ritual agency. The Gorgon's face – an emblem of terrifying, liminal, and transformative power – resonates with shamanic cosmology, encompassing the ability to confront and repel malevolent beings, traverse boundaries between worlds, and mediate between human and non-human realms. While in Greek culture Medusa protects by turning away evil, in the steppe, her hybrid, monstrous, and feminine nature aligned with symbolic systems in which animal-human metamorphosis, liminality, and mastery of danger were central to the role of ritual specialists. The Mereni mirror, therefore, is not just an imported object but a transculturally recontextualized emblem, adopted because its imagery already conveyed a power intelligible within Scythian religious logic.

The astragals further illuminate the woman's ritual role. In both sedentary and nomadic contexts, astragals served as tools for divination or games. In essence, divination, like a game of dice or astragals, operates on the principle that a supernatural entity may influence human destiny and determine the path to be followed.³³

The horse deposited adjacent to the woman's burial (probably sacrificed with the adjacent knife) provides an additional element consistent with shamanic interpretation.³⁴ Similarly, the whip is a key shamanic criterion: in Cimmerian, Scythian, and Turkic-Mongolian traditions, it functioned as a primary instrument for ritual and ecstatic journeys, symbolized power, and was associated with snakes and the World Tree, signifying both the shaman's authority and their ability to traverse between worlds.³⁵ The whip found with the female in grave 7 (**Fig. 5/10, Diagram 1/b**) is preserved only through its gold foil decoration, yet parallels can be drawn with whips featuring spiral gold handles from the dromos of the Scythian burial mound Tolstaya Mogila in Ukraine and the Saka burial mound Issyk in Kazakhstan, underscoring the continuity of this symbolic repertoire (**Diagram 1/c-f**).³⁶

The adjacent male burial, that of a „warrior” accompanied by an impressive set of bronze arrowheads, spearheads, and horse remains, represents the martial counterpart to the shamanic sphere. The spatial and structural parallels between the two graves, as well as their near-synchronous construction, strengthen the argument that they belong to the same community and perhaps reflect paired social roles: the protector in life and the protector in ritual. The catacomb with multiple entrances in both cases echoes Middle Scythian elite funerary practices, yet in the woman's burial, these architectural features reinforce the idea of ritualized circulation and controlled access – fitting for a shamanic practitioner.³⁷

³³ GRUMEZA 2024, 165, with further bibliography.

³⁴ In discussing the symbolic mobility of ritual specialists, Hasanov remarks that: „A horse, goat, deer, a bird, snake, or boat are primarily a shaman's means of transport” (HASANOV 2016, 206).

³⁵ HASANOV 2014, 77-78.

³⁶ See HASANOV 2014, 79, Fig. 1; HASANOV 2016, 208-209 with further bibliography.

³⁷ HASANOV 2016, 191 has argued that the dromos itself functions as a symbolic corridor between worlds, reinforcing its ritual significance.

The Mereni finds show that the myth of Medusa – already a deeply hybrid and archaic figure in the Greek world – could be adopted, transformed, and re-signified far beyond the Mediterranean. For nomadic societies, Medusa's monstrous femininity, liminal nature, and protective violence made her a strikingly suitable symbol. She embodied protection against hostile forces, female ritual authority, control over danger through gaze and transformation, and a hybrid identity that bridged human, animal, and supernatural realms. Thus, in the steppe, Medusa was not a mythic monster but a ritual „technology” – a visual device of power and protection integrated into shamanic practice.

The Scythian burials at Mereni illustrate how a Greek iconographic motif became meaningful within a non-Greek cosmology. By placing a Medusa-handled mirror in the grave of a female ritual specialist, the community at Mereni expressed a worldview where power, danger, and protection were negotiated through symbols capable of crossing cultural boundaries. The paired burial of a warrior and a shamanic woman further emphasizes the structural duality of Scythian society, in which martial and ritual roles were equally essential to group survival. Ultimately, the Mereni Medusa is not a passive import but a potent symbol of transcultural connectivity, revealing how myth and ritual intersected in the dynamic frontier between the Mediterranean and the Eurasian steppe.

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