A New Example of Ancient Metalwork from a Sarmatian Kurgan

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The Sarmatians were Iranian-speaking nomads who, over the course of centuries, dominated vast territories from the Lower Volga area to contemporary Hungary. Little has survived to remind us of this numerous nation—which once inspired terror in the Roman Empire—and the role they played in the formation of the national and cultural entities of contemporary Europe. There are descriptions by ancient authors and an excellent depiction on the Column of Trajan. Now, however, intensive archaeological research on Sarmatian kurgans (“burial mounds”) in the south of Russia is supplying increasingly noteworthy information.

Living directly adjacent to the Roman provinces, the Sarmatians received magnificent works of art as tribute, gifts, or booty taken by raiding parties. One of these works, a bronze pitcher decorated with scenes from the Trojan cycle (Fig. 1), is the subject of this article (Treister 1991). Familiar as episodes from this epic work are, the pitcher nevertheless posed some engaging questions of identification, which we try to resolve here.

KURGAN 4 FINDS

Kurgan 4, excavated in 1989, lies on the left bank of the Manych River (Fig. 3), 2 kilometers from Red Corner Farm in the Voskodovskiy district of the Rostov oblast. Burial 1 was located in the center of the kurgan and had been looted in antiquity. In the fill at the bottom of the pit lay the scattered bones of a woman, 20-25 years old (Fig. 4b), and the remains of her burial inventory, including beads of several kinds. Despite the sparseness of these finds and thus the conditional nature of their dates, the complex itself appears to date to no earlier than the second half of the 2nd century A.D.

Three meters to the south-southeast of the burial, a hiding-place in the form of a shallow round pit about 70 centimeters in diameter was cut into the subsoil. In it lay the bronze pitcher that is the subject of this article.

The body of the pitcher is decorated with repoussé work and engraving, and the handle with appliqués (Figs. 1, 2; for details, see Gogove and Treister

Plan of the northern Black Sea region showing the location of the kurgan group at Red Corner Farm. Kurgan is the Turkish word for a mound or tumulus burial. Densely spread across the Caspian lands, they are prominent witnesses to life and death in the ancient world.

Plan of Kurgan 4, Red Corner Farm (1) Location of Burial 1; (2) carbonized wood fragments; (3) hoard; (4) cache, or hiding place, in which the bronze pitcher was found; (5) surrounding fence, or ditch, about 10 m in diameter.

Plan of the burial. The skeletal remains of a woman, 20 to 25 years in age, lie scattered about.
1927); in each case the decoration consists of scenes from the Trojan cycle. An analogous form is seen in a pitcher from Gaul (Aintrais, in Burgundy) with relief decoration and a dedication to Mercury. It is dated by Künzl to the 2nd century and by Baratte to the 2nd-3rd centuries B.C. Künzl compares another vessel from Aintrais to unmannished pitchers of the 1st century A.D. (Künzl 1975:67, Pl. 23.2; Baratte 1984:88, fig. 23). One should add to this group of vessels a bronze pitcher with incrustation and relief decoration found in Avenches, Switzerland; this pitcher is tentatively dated by Leibundgut to the 1st century A.D. (1976:101–3, no. 121, Pl. 65).

**The Pitcher’s Handle**

On the lower part of the handle of Kurgan 4’s pitcher is a chariot drawn by two small draft animals, over which lies the body of the dead Hector (Figs. 5–6). Above Hector is the kneeling figure of an old man—Priam, king of Troy. He bows before Achilles, who sits to his right in the pose of a victor. Herakles stands to the left of Achilles. The scene appears to be an illustration of an episode from the 24th book of the Iliad in which Herakles advises Priam to come before Achilles with rich gifts in order to recover the body of his dead son Hector.

This scene enjoyed considerable popularity in ancient art from the Archaic period on (LMIC 1). In Roman art, it became a subject for painters, sculptors, gem-cutters, and die-cutters (artists who make the designs on coins). Examples include a silver pitcher from the hoard in Ilion (LMIC 1:154, no. 688), a silver goblet from Holby, Denmark (LMIC 1:154, no. 687), and a bronze pitcher in the Rockefelder Museum in Jerusalem (LMIC 1:154, no. 685; Hengel 1982). None of the other subjects depicted on this vessel find so many analogies among objects of decorative metalwork.

The central frieze on the handle of our vessel (Fig. 7) shows at left a male figure, facing right, who is wearing a pikes (conical felt hat) and is draped in a himation (a short cloak, usually worn by horsemen). To the right stands a male facing front, who presses his right hand to his chest. The figure on the left can reasonably be identified as Hektorinos, whose pointed cap is a constant attribute of his iconography (see, for example, bronze figurines of Hektorinos from the earliest centuries A.D. (Maccarrone 1974: no. 25; Gochwanter 1986:19, no. 2, fig. 14). The figure on the right, then, would be a Cylops (this attribution was suggested to us by E. Simon in a letter dated 18 September 1990). If so, the moment depicted is, as Simon suggests, the transfer of the armor of Achilles. The bust of a female figure found above the two male figures is most likely Thetis, who holds Achilles’ helmet in her hands (Figs. 7, 8). The female figure above Thetis is certainly Athena (Fig. 8).

The plume of Athena’s helmet rests against a female figure seated on the top of the handle (Fig. 9). This figure has her back turned to the scenes just described (see Fig. 1). She sits upon a rise on which lie round and oval shields with their bosses facing up. At either end of the arc that forms the handle’s upper attachment are identical half-reclining figures draped in elata (a kind of tunic). The figures, whose heads are missing, are symmetrically arranged with respect to the seated figure just described (see Fig. 5).

A close parallel to these topmost figures is found on a bronze vessel handle in the Louvre (Fig. 6; de Beller 1917, 2:121, no. 2825), which has been dated to the 2nd century A.D. (Mitten and Doering 1967: no. 307). On this handle is a seated, draped female with covered head and bare chest that is very similar stylistically to the figure crowning the handle of our vessel. Both are such rare,

![Fig. 5 Handle of the pitcher. The author's identifications: (a) Above a chariot, the body of the dead Hector; (b) Priam kneeling before Achilles; (c) Hermes as an Achilles’ rider; (d) Hektorinos, accompanied by a Cylops, reaches up to deliver the arms of Achilles to Thetis; (e) Athena leaps against a woman whose back is turned to us; (f) two reclining figures who may represent the rivers Scamander and Simois. For details, see Figures 6-9.](image)
In the view of E. Simon (pers. com., 18 September 1990), two separate scenes are represented here, in a very stylized and classicizing manner. Both depict the dedicatory sacrifice of a young woman. It might thus seem that the female figures are identical and represent one character, and that the frieze depicts one continuous action. However, the background on either side of where the handle attaches indicates two different places of action.

The first setting, at the left of the rollout drawing in Figure 11, is a large altar, with a tree and a goddess who, judging by the iconography, is Artemis. Simon interprets the altar scene as an epoche in the saga of Iphigenia at Aulis. Iphigenia was brought to Aulis under the pretext of meeting Achilles, to whom she had been promised as a bride. The scene to the right of the altar depicts Iphigenia at that moment when she finds out the real intentions of the Achaians—her sacrifice—and she covers her face with the edge of her cloak (Fig. 12). In front of her is depicted not the prophet Calchas, as is usual in this scene, but Achilles with a bared sword. In Simon’s view, this substitution is consistent with the repeated association of the pitcher’s main themes (including the scenes on the handle) with Achilles.

The second setting, at the drawing’s right, is a funerary monument (Figs. 11, 13). It consists of a gravestone of Hellenistic form: an Ionic column with a shield, indicating that the deceased was a warrior. Peeking out from behind the shield is a sorrowful being with the wings of a butterfly, who personifies the soul of the deceased. A half-naked woman is brought in for sacrifice. The subject is the sacrifice of Polyxena, performed by Achilles’ son Neoptolemos at Achilles’ tomb. The pitcher’s “cycle of Achilles” is now complete.

Between these two scenes sits a warrior, who looks at Iphigenia and thus clearly belongs to the first scene (Figs. 11, 14). In Simon’s view, this character is Achilles’ friend Patroclus. Patroclus unites the two scenes, for Achilles’ early death occurred as a result of the revenge that Achilles undertook on behalf of Patroclus.

At first glance, the scene on the left calls to mind Orestes and Pylades before Iphigenia at Aulis. But then both Greeks should appear side by side, and they would hardly have been armed. In addition, the female figure’s right hand holds not the assuam, or wooden cult statue, of Artemis of Tauris, but the hem of her clothing, which means she is crying. Simon suggests this final scene in the cycle of Achilles depicts Iphigenia at Aulis, not Tauris, with Achilles and Patroclus. In that case, the altar depicted belongs to Artemis of Aulis as well.

Iconographically, the scene represented is not the known type, in which a bearded Calchas appears in the role of priest; nevertheless, Achilles fits here, as he does on the arch of Kleomenes in Florence, for example. A weeping Iphigenia appears in a similar context on the Homeric golds, on which the depiction of her sacrifice, unfortunately, does not.

**Fig. 9** Female figure in the upper part of the pitcher handle. The identity of this drooping, sorrowful figure is still unknown. It is very likely one of a pitcher handle in the Louvre (see Fig. 10).

**Fig. 10** Female figure on the handle of a pitcher from the Louvre. Although of unknown provenience, the piece is so similar to Burial I’s pitcher that it might even come from the same hand or workshop.

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**Scenes on the Body of the Pitcher: One Interpretation**

Determining attributions for the main frieze of the pitcher (Fig. 11) presents a rather complicated problem. To gain as objective a picture as possible, I acquainted a number of specialists in the field of ancient art and bronze relief work with the Kurgan 4 find.
A SECOND INTERPRETATION

As E. Künzl notes (pers. comm., 17 September 1990), the scenes of the main frieze on the pitcher and the representations on the handle are connected with the Trojan cycle. He too supposes that the main scene cannot be an illustration of the sacrifice of Polyxena, as the killing should be performed by Calchas, not by a young man. Besides, there is no sacrificial dowry shown. The scene is far more likely to represent the sacrifice of Polyxena, who would then be the woman taking refuge at the left of the altar. In the end Polyxena goes voluntarily to the tomb of Achilles, where, as shown on the right of the drawing, she is sacrificed by Neoptolemos. Künzl thus identifies the male figure to the right of the altar as Neoptolemos also. More complications are introduced by Künzl’s identification (citing Euryptides) of the female figure facing Neoptolemos as Hebeusa, pleading that Polyxena’s life be spared. Künzl identifies the central male figure with sword, seated on a rock, as Agamemnon; however, he marks this attribution with a question mark.

Along with his interpretation of the main frieze, Künzl hypothesizes that Achilles had a twin. Possibly the other pitcher depicted Priam in place of his wife, Hebeusa (although Priam, admittedly, pleaded not with Neoptolemos but with Achilles for the release of Polyxena). Thus, like the two "Trojan pitchers" from Berghäusen, it is possible to think of two "Trojan pitchers" from the Lower Don River area, one depicting Hebeusa, the other Priam, one with their daughter Polyxena, the other with their son Hector.

A THIRD INTERPRETATION

I incline on the whole toward Künzl’s interpretation of the main frieze, while noting that we differ in our identification of the central figure (Fig. 14). It seems to me that this is neither Patroklos as Simon supposes, nor Agamemnon as Künzl suggests, but Achilles. Simon correctly noted that this figure seems to unite both scenes of the frieze. The figure of Achilles can serve in such a capacity, as well as linking the scenes of the frieze with those of the handle.

Somewhat similar to the figure on our pitcher is a depiction of Achilles on a goblet from Ingolstadt, dating to the end of the 1st century A.D. (Adriani 1960; Baratte 1984:88, fig. 22). Here he also sits on a rock, in profile to the left. He is practically naked, a cloak, with its end thrown carelessly over his left shoulder, hangs down his left side. This depiction differs from ours in having a smaller variety of folds in the clothing, a less modeled representation of the musculature of the body, a depiction of the sword strap across the chest of the hero, and no sword. In addition, unlike our figure, Achilles is drawn directly into the scene of the killing, calling attention to it with outstretched hand.

Still, it seems to us that the figure on our pitcher and Achilles on the Ingolstadt goblet are essentially one and the same. The artists of both vessels undoubtedly drew inspiration from a common source, but expressed their artistic vision in different ways.

A stylistic analysis of our pitcher and other comparable artifacts shows that although these are both Bronze vessels with Homeric subjects are similar to the silver goblets and pitchers of the Augustan and Claudian periods, they date to a later era, the period of the Antonine “renaissance” in the 2nd century a.d. in which months of an earlier period were revived (Vermeule 1968:137).

The archaeological context of the pitcher need not be taken into account when discussing its symbolism because the young Sarmatian woman in whose burial it was hidden was evidently not its first owner. A clear gap exists
between its date of manufacture and the date of the burial complex. The pitcher most likely found its way into the Sarmatian kurgan as a result of looting. A specific provenience for the vessel prior to the assumed robbery is difficult to identify. Judging by its state of preservation, the pitcher was not long in use or transport. It may have once been placed in a temple in the capacity of a votive. Or it could have been used as a vessel for special occasions in a wealthy Bosporian's villa. The pitcher may then have been seized by Sarmatians at the time of their raids in the Danube River region. Or it may have made an even more complicated journey across the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire: it could have been seized at the time of Sarmatian raids in the Trans-Caucasus region.

The pitcher's unusual fate in antiquity has a bitter echo in more recent history. After a year on display in the local museum at Taganrog, the pitcher was stolen in December of 1990. It lay hidden for about a year with other stolen objects before it was returned to its rightful place, fortunately undamaged.

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