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## SPECIAL RITUALS, RITES AND CUSTOMS OF TREATMENT OF HUMAN BODIES (A CASE STUDY OF SARMATIAN CULTURES) <sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article presents characteristics of special rituals, rites and customs identified in Sarmatian cultures of Eastern Europe. For example, a group of prone burials of the Late Sarmatian time was distinguished in the course of the research. As shown by the comparative historical analysis of the prone burials, this society differed from other synchronous groups of the population in the relatively mass nature of such burials. Analysing the details of the burial rite does not provide an unambiguous explanation of the motivation of prone burials. Most likely human sacrifices and ritual killing of the elderly and old people were possible there, and such burials could be associated with harmfulness of the dead. In addition to this rite, a group of burials with the observed post-mortem and antemortem rites in relation to the head / skull was distinguished. First, this is decapitation and performance of certain rites with the head / skull. After this the skull was either placed in the burial or kept with the people (burials of postcranial skeletons). Second, the skull could be placed in a separate grave (partial burials). Third, after separation the skull could be subject to trepanation, which was a ritual function. Intravital trepanation was carried out for medicinal purposes. The rare rite of scalping could be attributed to military customs. Since the frequency of occurrence of special rites in relation to the skull and head in Sarmatian cultures is small, they could be connected either with the antemortem status or with the circumstances surrounding the death of the person. The most common practice was the custom of deliberate deformation of the head, which performed both utilitarian and symbolic functions.

**Key words:** rite, ritual, custom, custom of artificial deformation of the head, buried body position, decapitation, skeleton, skull.

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## ОСОБЫЕ РИТУАЛЫ, ОБРЯДЫ И ОБЫЧАИ ОБРАЩЕНИЯ С ТЕЛОМ ЧЕЛОВЕКА (ПО МАТЕРИАЛАМ САРМАТСКИХ КУЛЬТУР) <sup>1</sup>

**Мария Афанасьевна Балабанова**

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**Аннотация.** В данной статье приводится характеристика особых ритуалов, обрядов и обычаев, выявленных в сарматских культурах Восточной Европы. Так, в процессе исследования была выделена группа погребений позднесарматского времени в позе на животе. Как показал сравнительно-исторический анализ

погребений в указанной позе, данное общество отличалось от остальных синхронных групп населения относительной массовостью таких погребений. Анализ деталей погребального обряда не дает однозначного решения мотивировки погребений в позе на животе. Скорее всего, имели место и возможные человеческие жертвоприношения и ритуальное умерщвление пожилых и старых людей, а также такие захоронения могли быть связаны с вредоносностью умерших. Кроме этого обряда, была выделена группа погребений, в которых наблюдались посмертные и прижизненные обряды по отношению к черепу/голове. Во-первых, это декапитация и совершение с головой/черепом определенных обрядов. После этого череп либо помещали в погребение, либо хранили у себя (захоронения посткрана). Во-вторых, череп мог помещаться в отдельную могилу (парциальные захоронения). В-третьих, после отсечения череп мог подвергаться трепанации, которая выполняла ритуальную функцию. Прижизненные трепанации выполнялись в лечебных целях. Редко встречающийся обряд скальпирования можно отнести к воинским обычаям. Так как частота встречаемости особых обрядов по отношению к черепу и голове в сарматских культурах небольшая, то они могли быть связаны либо с прижизненным статусом, либо с обстоятельствами смерти человека. Наиболее распространенной практикой был обычай преднамеренной деформации головы, который выполнял как утилитарную функцию, так и знаковую.

**Ключевые слова:** обряд, ритуал, обычай, обычай искусственной деформации головы, поза погребенного, декапитация, скелет, череп.

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**Introduction.** Ritual, rite and custom are forms of continuity in traditional cultures that perform certain various functions. Here are some of them:

- 1) regulating the emotional state of people;
  - 2) forming a sense of community with tribesmen;
  - 3) helping individuals to feel their identity;
  - 4) preserving values of the ethnos, etc.
- [Chernyavskaya, 2000, p. 117, 118].

All the three forms belong to symbolic forms of human behavior and are reconstructed during the study of archaeological and anthropological materials of the Sarmatian cultural historical community of the East European steppes. As for unusual rituals, rites and customs, it appears that they are associated not with a common situation or a special position of the dead in society.

The goal of our research is to give characteristics of unusual rituals, rites and customs which are associated with antemortem and post-mortem treatment of human bodies.

**Post-mortem Manipulations with Human Bodies.** As a result of studying the morphology of the burial rite by Yu.A. Smirnov [1997, p. 202], two main traditions of treatment of bodies of the dead were distinguished. The first tradition leads to possibly complete preservation of bodies or at least to the absence of disruption of their anatomical continuity in relation to both soft tissues and the skeleton, and development of the second

one – to the disruption of the bodies' integrity in different forms and to a different degree. Certainly, such a classification is rather conditional because both traditions can coexist in one and the same people at the same time, and disruption or preservation of anatomical continuity of the bodies of the dead can depend on their social standing, circumstances surrounding the death and other reasons. Moreover, one or another people could practice unusual ways to bury the dead along with preservation or non-preservation of anatomical continuity.

*Unusual Burial Rites.* They include peculiarities of treatment of human bodies which were reflected in the burial rite and are not common for each of Sarmatian cultures. In this regard, a group of burials in which the position given to the bodies is not supine, as in the common ritual, but “face down”, “on the stomach”, “prone” (Fig. 1) should be pointed out. While there are only a few such burials of the Early Sarmatian and the Middle Sarmatian cultures, more than two dozens can be mentioned for the Late Sarmatian culture. Analysis of the archaeological context of these Late Sarmatian burials made it possible to distinguish three groups of burials in which also other rites, except the prone position, are found.

The first group is associated with the difference from the common Late Sarmatian rite only in the prone position, the rest of the burial ritual is observed (Fig. 1, 1–8).



The second group is burials of people who can be defined as those sentenced to death. In addition to the rite of face down, their hands and legs were bound (Fig. 1,9–13). There is also another evidence of “violence”. For example, on the skull of a woman whose remains were found in a pair burial of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mound, the 2<sup>nd</sup> burial ground, excavated by P.S. Rykov [1926, p. 105] close to Zeleny settlement (western Kazakhstan), there were traces of incisions, possibly traces of scalping (?), and traces of trepanation in the area of the right parietal bone.

A very similar situation with male skeletons in relation to the woman’s one was identified during the excavation of the collective burial of mound 6 of Selivanovsky II burial ground. The author of the publication V.K. Fedorov [2011, p. 214; Rafikova, Fedorov, 2017, p. 159, 160] reconstructing the rite points out the big crouch of both skeletons, which is possible in case of cutting tendons in the joints of the extremities with subsequent binding.

We have also described possible cases of violation towards the dead lying face down. The detailed analysis is presented in a separate work [Balabanova, 2012].

The third group consists of the burials in which disruption of anatomical continuity of skeletons was found (Fig. 1,1–16). For example, anatomic position of the skull was modified in two male burials from mound 2 of Kegult burial ground and mound 4 of Uyazebashevo burial ground (Rykov, 1931; Pshenichnyuk, 1983). In addition to these two cases associated with modification of the position of the skull, disruption of anatomical continuity of the postcranial skeleton and lack of some bones were established. Such a situation was registered with a woman from burial 1, mound 2 of Krivaya Luka I burial ground and with a man from burial 1, mound 49 of Krivaya Luka XVII burial ground [Dvornichenko et al., 1977, p. 7; Dvornichenko et al., 1979]. At the same time the authors of the excavations write nothing about disturbance of the mound barrow with the purpose of robbery.

Since there is no single explanation for all prone burials, it can be assumed that the Late Sarmatian population had a certain algorithm of actions in various special circumstances of life and death of the buried people, which resulted in burials with an unusual body position.

*Post-mortem and Antemortem Manipulations with Skulls.* The results of studies of traditional cultures show belief in special powers which remain in mind of people not only during their life, but also after their death. The idea of a special supernatural power localized in the head manifests itself in the cult of the skull and head among peoples practicing head hunting. The cult of the “skull and head” has a wide variety of archaeological characteristics as a particular ritual of partial burials in cultures of a vast territorial chronological range. This cult is also traced during registration of burials in which the skull plays a certain role.

Analysis of materials of Sarmatian cultures also makes it possible to distinguish rites associated with the head / skull. They include post-mortem manipulations with the head / skull before burial or after the burial of the dead, burials without heads / skulls, partial burials of the head / skull, etc. The entire list above makes it possible to distinguish the following rites associated with post-mortem or antemortem manipulations with the head / skull.

1. Separation of skulls from bodies and, apparently, performance of some rituals before the burial. During that time bodies of the dead without the skulls could be in the burial chamber of the grave or in a temporary grave or somewhere else.

2. Antemortem and post-mortem trepanation of skulls.

3. Scalping.

4. Deliberate artificial deformation of skulls.

5. Manufacture of cups from skulls.

**1. Separation of skulls from bodies.** This category includes burials with a modified anatomic position of the skull (head) with probable post-mortem manipulations with the head or the macerated skull and partial burials.

Let us consider the characteristics of some burials made according to this rite. In this regard, elite Early Sarmatian burial 3, mound 7, Belokamenka II burial ground of the excavations of 1988 [Mordvintseva, Shinkar, 1999, p. 138]<sup>2</sup> is of great interest (Fig. 2,1). A young woman, about 16 years old, and an elderly man over 50 years old were buried in a deep pit with a niche. The woman lay in the niche, and the decapitated skeleton of the man lay next to her partially at the bottom of the entrance pit. The skull along with the first two cervical vertebrae lay away from the body next to

the female skull to the right of the postcranial skeleton.

Another case is when the skull was at the place in the burial but just turned upside down and lay with the facial skull down while the anatomical order of the rest of the skeleton was preserved (burial grounds: Chetyre Brata, mound 3, burial 6; Sidory, mound 9, burial 1, etc.). The authors of the excavations sometimes mention activity of rodents and burrowing animals, which is not completely excluded [Shilov, 1959; Moshkova, Maksimenko, 1974, p. 26, Tab. XI, 4]. Burial 6 of mound 3 of Chetyre Brata burial ground which is male with weapons is military (?), and the burial from mound 9 of Sidory burial ground is female.

In male burial 2, mound 25, Tri Brata burial ground, the skull was, according to the author of the publication I.V. Sinitsyn [1956, p. 34–37], replaced by marmots and located between the thighbones, the lower jaw retained its antemortem position. The wide subsquare pit was filled in with stones but not with soil. This burial dates back to Sauromatian times.

A female skull with traces of fronto-occipital artificial deformation was found in the materials of the entrance pit of a Late Sarmatian grave of the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, mound 11 of Dorofeevsky burial ground. The postcranial skeleton was located at the bottom of the grave with a niche in a slightly crouched position on the right side of the body, with the head to the south [Shilov, 1976].

Another interesting case was discovered in the Late Sarmatian burial of mound 12, Krivaya Luka XVII burial ground. There was an old woman, and her skull was under the right humerus, with the occipital foramen up [Dvornichenko et al., 1979]. The lower jaw retained its antemortem position (Fig. 2,2). A young woman aged 16-18 was buried in mound 17 of the same burial ground (Fig. 2,3). She lay extended on the back, along the axes of the niche, with the head to the southeast. In addition to the lack of bones of the forearm and both hands, the humerus of the right arm, the fibula of the right leg and the feet of both legs, her skull was located close to the right shoulder, slightly higher. The lower jaw retained its antemortem position [Dvornichenko et al., 1979]. The authors of the excavations, despite noting the lack of apparent distortion of the mound

barrow, nevertheless, think that the burial was visited by robbers.

Another position of the skull which was found during opening of burial 1, mound 12, Sladkovka burial ground is also associated with activity of robbers (Fig. 2,4). A male skeleton without the skull lay diagonally in a wide square pit. The skull together with the lower jaw was in the southern part of the grave, the rest of the skeleton and the burial was not distorted. According to V.E. Maksimenko [1998, p. 150, 151, 201], the skull together with the lower jaw were taken away to the robbers' pit. The "rich military diagonal" burial dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The robbers disturbed only the part where the head of the buried person was placed.

This group includes also burials without skulls, i.e. they are burials of postcranial skeletons. The lack of skulls in burials is not a rare phenomenon in the mass of steppe burials from the Bronze Era to the Late Middle Ages, but there are only a few of them in Sarmatian complexes. For example, in Early Sarmatian military burial 14, mound 1, Petrunino II burial ground, in a rectangular pit with ledges there was a male skeleton lying extended on the back, with the head to the south, the skull was absent [Sergatskov, 2000, p. 40] (Fig. 2,5). Along with the decapitated skeleton, the burial contained a complete military set of weapons: a short dagger, a long sword, three-bladed tanged iron arrowheads, a fragment of a quiver hook, an openwork buckle depicting a predator attacking a camel.

Another burial of those times without a skull was excavated in burial 15, mound 3, Rybny burial ground [Skripkin, 1976].

A postcranial skeleton was also discovered in the Middle Sarmatian burial of mound 23, Avilovsky II burial ground [Sergatskov, 2000, p. 93] (Fig. 2,6). Except the lack of the skull, the burial does not differ much from the general mass of ordinary Middle Sarmatian burials.

Burial of postcranial skeletons was also practiced by population of the Late Sarmatian time in exceptional cases. It was made in burial 2, mound 38, Pokrovsk burial ground, the Southeast group, and in burial 1, mound 21, Krivaya Luka XIV burial ground [Dvornichenko et al., 1975]. In the burial from Pokrovsk, at the bottom of a rectangular pit there was a male skeleton without the skull and several upper vertebrae, extended

on the back, with hands along the body, with the head to the north [Rykov, 1922, p. 9]. Although the author of the excavations and the publication does not comment on this situation, he notes that the whole burial is burrowed by rodents. In this case activity of burrowing animals is not excluded, although it is nevertheless suspicious that the skull is absent together with several cervical vertebrae.

As for the second burial from Krivaya Luka, as noted by the authors of the excavations, "there is no apparent distortion of the barrow", however, in addition to the fact that the buried person had no skull, the anatomic position of the bones of the left arm and the left shoulder blade was modified. They are displaced and lie under a step at the bottom of the pit [Dvornichenko et al., 1975].

There are individual burials of skulls along with burials of postcranial skeletons without skulls. Two of such burials were discovered among the huge mass of burials of Sarmatian culture and both of them belong to the Late Sarmatian time. They were opened relatively recently during the excavations of burials of Nedostupov burial ground, mound 2, in 2003, and Solomatino I burial ground, mound 4, in 2005 [Myskov et al., 2006; Sergatskov, 2006] (Fig. 2,7,8). Both burials are male with ordinary equipment typical of the Late Sarmatian complexes. In burial 1, mound 4, Solomatino I burial ground, along with other funerary equipment, there was a long sword without a pommel and a cross-guard with a pin grip. The ritual significance of this pair of partial burials can be disputed, since it can be also assumed that the men died in some other place, and their skulls / heads, as less massive, were brought home for a secondary burial. Such cases are known in ethnography of various peoples.

All the forms of treatment of skulls listed above can be attributed to extraordinary cases because there are no more than a dozen of them per thousands of burials in each Sarmatian culture. It appears that they should be connected with the antemortem status or a special position of the people buried in them as well as with the circumstances surrounding the death (priestesses, leaders, heads of clans, untimely dead people, etc.).

**2. Antemortem and post-mortem trepanation of skulls.** Analysis of huge material of Sauromatian-Sarmatian cultures identifies more than ten cases of various trepanations. For example, in male (30–35 years old) burial 4

(Sauromatian time, 6–4 centuries BC) mound 13, Bykovo burial ground, there was a braincase on the right parietal bone of which, in its central part, a sub-rectangular defect with a rounded left upper edge was registered slightly higher than the squamosal border in the area of the inferior temporal line (Fig. 3,1) [Smirnov, 1960, p. 206].

Most likely the operation was carried out antemortem and the traces of healing on the walls and edges of the defect indicate a favorable outcome of the manipulation. It appears that the person lived for a long time after the operation.

Another case of trepanation of the skull was described by D.G. Rokhlin [1965]. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the exact origin of the skull. In his work he writes that the skull originates from the Don region. Presumably the discovery was made during excavations of the burial grounds of the flood zone of the Tsimlyansk reservoir, which were excavated by units of the Volga-Don archaeological expedition led by M.I. Artamonov in 1949–1951 [Archaeological Encyclopedia ... , 2009, p. 18]. D.G. Rokhlin [1965, p. 174, 195] published a radiograph of the skull which shows that in the parietal bone there is a rounded opening with smooth contours due to the closing plate covering the spongy substance and connected with the outer and inner plates of the parietal bone (Fig. 3,2). The scientist did not find any evidence of complications after the surgical intervention. The operation most likely was of a therapeutic nature.

Three cases of trepanation of the skull were discovered in the materials of the Middle Sarmatian time.

The first one was obtained during excavations of the mound burial ground close to the village of Baranovka, Chernoyarsky District, Astrakhan Region. A partially destroyed skull of a man aged 25–35 was found in burial 2 of mound 21. There was a through defect of irregular sub-trapezoidal shape, with the long axis oriented in the sagittal direction, in the center of the squamous part of its temporal bone. The bottom base of the trapezoid is located closer to the parietal border and the top base is directed to the sphenoidal margin. The length of the defect is 29,5 mm, the maximum width is 22 mm. The thickness of the bone in the place of the defect is 3 mm. The outer and inner edges of the injury are sharp. The base is a semicircle with walls that are oblique inward



and were formed as a result of drilling eight holes of different sizes, between which there are partitions up to 2 mm wide (Fig. 3,3). The operation was carried out as a post-mortem one, most likely for ritual purposes.

The second case was discovered on the skull of a young woman aged 25–30 from burial 3, mound 45, Peregruznoe I burial ground. A rounded defect of 5x5 mm without perforation into the cavity of the skull was registered on the right parietal bone during the examination of the braincase (Fig. 3,4). A through opening with a diameter of 8 mm affecting the sagittal suture was found 6 mm from the first injury and 22 mm from the bregma craniological point. The defect has a round shape. The type of trepanation is drilling. According to the state of the bottom surface of the nonpenetrating defect, the operation was performed by rotating a drill with a semicircular tip. Most likely the manipulation was carried out for ritual purposes [Pererva, 2012].

The last skull, also female (35–45 years old), with trepanation originates from Verbovsky I burial ground, which is located on the right bank of the Donskaya Tsaritsa River, in 1.5 km northeast of Verbovsky khutor of Kalachevsky District in Volgograd Region. Three trepanation holes, with clear, even contours are observed on the braincase, on the border of the squame of the occipital bone and the left parietal bone, along the lambdoid suture, in the projection of the sagittal suture (Fig. 3,5). The macroscopic description of the find and its examination with the use of computed tomography, as well as the archaeological context of the burial made it possible to establish that drilling was the method by which trepanation was carried out. The lack of traces of healing on the defect indicates the pre-mortem and / or post-mortem nature of trepanation, and the rich funerary equipment in the burial from which the braincase and the plurality of holes originate, as well as the localization of the defects, indicate a symbolically ritual significance of the operation that was carried out [Mamontov et al., 2018].

Other two skulls with trepanation were discovered in the Late Sarmatian material. One of them was obtained during the excavations of Glazunovsky burial ground. It was studied by forensic expert V.V. Sidorov [1996], who established that there was a trephine oval opening with a tissue defect of 7 × 6 mm in the posterior

parietal bone 32 mm to the right of the sagittal suture and 23 mm from the right limb of the lambdoid suture (Fig. 3,6). The edges of the injury were rounded outside, the walls are oblique from the back to the front, from the right to the left and slightly from the top to the bottom.

As a result of studying the lower jaw, V.V. Sidorov also revealed artificial holes at the base of its both vertical rami. Analysis of the manipulations on the skull allowed the expert to conclude that the injuries in the area of both vertical rami of the lower jaw were sustained during the lifetime and formed as a result of drilling directed from the inside to the outside and from the back to the front, which can be interpreted as a ritual action. Trepanation on the right in the posterior parietal bone was carried out by rotating a cylindrical subject having three protruding ribs on the lateral surfaces of the end part, probably, the end part of an arrow having a metal head.

Another skull was discovered by P.S. Rykov [1926, p. 105] in pair burial 2 of mound 2 of the burial ground of the Late Sarmatian time close to Zeleny settlement (West Kazakhstan Region of the Republic of Kazakhstan). According to this scientist, there were traces of incisions, probably, traces of scalping (?) on the female skull, and it was also trepanized in the area of the right parietal bone, the shape of the hole was rectangular. The author of the publication believes that the woman was thrown or put down into the pit, “with the purpose of her placement next to the dead” man. Both of the dead lie prone.

**3. Scalping.** Skulls with traces of scalping were found in materials of the Sarmatian time. For example, as a result of the work with the materials kept in the anthropological laboratory of Southern Federal University, traces of incisions were discovered on the bone tissue of the braincases of four individuals from burials of the Sarmatian time of Novy mound burial ground [Pererva, 2005]. According to L.S. Ilyukov and M.V. Vlaskin [1992], all the burials date back to the Early Sarmatian time. The first two cases of scalping were obtained during the excavations of pair burial 4, mound 85. Distinct traces of linear incisions were registered on the frontal and left parietal bones of the braincase of a young man (20–25 years old, skeleton a) (Fig. 4,1). Eight notches parallel to each other were discovered on the right half of the frontal bone. On the left

parietal bone, also four poorly distinguishable incisions were registered, they were observed slightly lower than the parietal ridge. The second skull from the same burial (skeleton b) belonged to a young woman aged 17–19. Thirteen cut marks were registered on her skull (Fig. 4,2): nine notches on the frontal bone, two on the right parietal bone and other two on the occipital bone.

The second case of scalping was discovered on the skull of a man aged 20–25 from burial 7, mound 129. Incisions of different length were discovered on the right and left parietal bones during examination of the skull.

The third case was also discovered on the skull of a man (aged 30–35) from burial 8, mound 129. Traces of notches made most likely with a subject having a sharp cutting edge were discovered around the circumference of his braincase during its examination. Seven incisions were registered on the frontal bone (Fig. 4,3). An incision of about 20 mm oriented in the sagittal direction was observed on the parietal bone just 5 mm from the parietal border of the right temporal bone and 30 mm from the occipital suture. Other two notches parallel to each other and oriented across the skull were discovered on the occipital bone of the male skull, slightly lower than the superior nuchal line.

In addition to the cases of scalping discovered in the materials of the Early Sarmatian time from Novy burial ground, probably, scalping was also practiced by the Late Sarmatian society, which is confirmed by P.S. Rykov [1926, p. 105] describing a female skull from burial 2, mound 2 of the burial ground close to Zeleny settlement.

Therefore, it appears that the examined defects on the Sarmatian skulls from Novy burial ground as well as on the female skull from the burial ground close to Zeleny settlement are the consequence of military ritual scalping.

**4. Deliberate artificial deformation of skulls.** Deliberate artificial deformation can be attributed to the most massive antemortem manipulation in relation to the head in Sarmatian cultures. Analysis of the paleoanthropological material of the Early Iron Age epoch shows that there are no sufficiently stable early centers of the deformation custom in the territory of Eastern Europe. There is information on several skulls of the Sauromatian time on which deformation traces can be observed: one skull from the Ural burial

ground named Lebedevka with fronto-occipital deformation, and two skulls with deformation points were discovered in the Lower Volga burial ground named Krivaya Luka [Efimova, 2006, p. 133, 134; Balabanova, 2004, p. 172] (Fig. 5,1). There is also data on deformation of the head practiced by the European Scythians [Shepel, 2002, p. 150–152]. However, this custom was mainly practiced by the Late Sarmatian society and can be observed in all three local groups: the Southern Urals, the Lower Volga and the Lower Don. The frequency of deformation in the Lower Volga total sample group is about 70.0%, in the Lower Don sample group it is slightly less, about 50% [Balabanova, 2001, p. 111; 2004, p. 172; 2017, p. 18, 20; Batiava, 2006, p. 57; 2011, p. 41]. The share of deformed skulls is minimum 50.0% among individual Lower Volga burial grounds and minimum 25.0% among Lower Don ones. In the Uralic Late Sarmatian series the share of deformed skulls reaches 100.0% in Pokrovka burial ground 10 and up to 45.0% in Lebedevka burial ground [Yablonskiy, 2008, p. 75; Moshkova, 1982, p. 80]. The type of deformation in all the regions is determined as frontal-occipital, circular and mixed frontal-occipital in combination with circular (Fig. 5,2–5).

Analysis of written and ethnographic sources, as well as paleoanthropological material found in burials of various archaeological cultures shows that the specific shape of the head was evidently a desirable attribute of representatives of individual nationalities, classes, social groups, etc.

**5. Manufacture of cups from skulls.** The first description of manufacturing cups from skulls of enemies and relatives is given by Herodotus [IV. 65], who attributes it to military customs. To obtain a cup, first the skull was sawn off at the level of eyebrows and cleaned, then it was covered outside with cowhide and used in this form. Rich people covered the inner part of cups with gilding. “During visits of respected guests the owner brings out such skulls and reminds guests that these relatives were his enemies and that he defeated them”. A fragment of a cup made most likely from a human skull was found in Krepostnoe Gorodishche burial ground, the material accompanying it dates back to the 1–2 centuries AD [Kosyanenko, Maslovskiy, 2004, p. 458–462; Batiava, 2004, p. 465]<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 6). The fact that this fragment of the cup belongs to the

Middle Sarmatian culture is doubtful, nevertheless, exactly this time is distinguished by the increased number of nomads in the ancient Lower Don settlements.

**Discussion of the Results and the Main Conclusions.** The Sauromatian-Sarmatian society, as well as its predecessors, tribes of pit, catacomb and log cultures, except mass forms of burial practice based on stereotyped common actions, has also special ones, which are extremely rare. We are well aware of the difficulty of identification of special rituals, rites and customs of treatment of human bodies, since reconstruction of this burial system with the use of archaeological materials is very hypothetical. Moreover, the information which could confirm presence or lack of one or another rite of the people under study is very often lost in the course of excavations without registration. Consequently, the study included only the group of burials in which deliberateness of manipulations with bodies of the dead raised no doubts either among the authors or us<sup>4</sup>.

It is known that the position of the dead which is given to them during the funeral is one of the most permanent attributes of burial rites. Sufficiently stable rules and canons of placement of the dead into the grave, which are breached only in exceptional cases, can be observed since ancient times. Deviations from canons were most often associated with the social standing of the dead and implied special ways of treatment of the dead bodies. They include also those that were considered in this work: prone burials; manipulations with the skull, reburials (secondary burials); partial burials, etc.

The most mass material is represented by a group of prone or face down burials. The above characteristics of such burials and their peculiarities make it possible to approach interpretation of this ritual not in a single manner, and the comparative historical analysis of the rite found almost in all ancient and modern traditional cultures of Eurasia gives several semantic solutions:

- 1) it was applied to the dead with post-mortem harmfulness in relation to the living people: shamans, sorcerers, witches, ghouls, etc.;
- 2) it was applied to untimely dead people, etc.;
- 3) it was applied to those sentenced to death or human sacrifices;

4) the rite “messengers to the gods”, which is a rite of farewell before the other world, was used [Balabanova, 2012, p. 83–86; Rafikova, Fedorov, 2017, p. 159–171].

The archaeological context of face down burials shows that this practice was applied both as an independent measure and in combination with other ones. Decapitation of the bodies of the dead with the change of the position of the skull as well as binding of arms and legs and disruption of the anatomical continuity of the skeleton were most often used as an accompanying measure.

Post-mortem and antemortem manipulations with the skull are reconstructed in burials which are secondary or partial, for example, burials of postcranial skeletons or only skulls, skulls with trepanation, etc. These actions most often precede decapitation, which is one of techniques of treatment of bodies leading to removal of the head from the corpse. In case of both artificial and natural decapitation bodies of the dead were placed in “temporary burials” [Smirnov, 1997, p. 185–189]. Decapitation in the Sarmatian burial practice implies the situation where partial exhumation and elimination of the skull from the burial can be performed in terms of a complete burial ritual. As a rule, even after disappearance of all soft tissues the skull is removed along with the atlas, i.e. the first cervical vertebra, and in case of decapitation the atlas and the epistropheus, rarely the third cervical vertebra, remain in the place (i.e. with the skull). After decapitation, maceration was carried out for subsequent manipulations, including those connected with post-mortem trepanation. During that time postcranial skeletons of the dead were placed in temporary graves (ritual sites) or in their graves, which were not filled in with soil until the ritual actions with the skulls were finished. This time is enough for partial decomposition of the corpses. This situation is reconstructed during studying the burial rite of a woman from the elite burial 3, mound 45, Peregruznoe I burial ground [Demkin et al., 2012, p. 132–134].

The episodes described above, including various manipulations with the skull, allow us to assume that Sarmatian tribes had a skull or head cult in relation to certain tribesmen, whose skulls were used for ritual purposes. Sacred grounds of treatment of the skull can be traced both in ethnography of peoples of the world and in world



poetry, not only in the famous Shakespearean Hamlet but also in the poem by Byron titled “Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed from a Skull”, published in 1808. There are numerous archaeological facts indicating that exactly heads of the dead were subject to a special treatment [Dmitriev, 1997; Khlobystina, 1999; Mednikova, 2004; Nepodkosov, 2013, etc.]. They include also burials of only one skull or head without bones of the postcranial skeleton. This rite was not widespread in the Sarmatian society but it is found in cultures of a wide territorial chronological range, and the cult of the head (skull) of ancient peoples is associated with it most often.

For the most part of burials characteristics of which were described above, it is possible to assume their secondary nature. For example, the female corpse from elite burial 3, mound 45 was divided before the burial: the head (skull), several thoracic vertebrae, leg bones together with the feet of the legs were cut off [Demkin et al., 2012, p. 133]. A similar situation can be also observed in other elite burials.

The practice of double or secondary burials is known among many peoples. Double burials were practiced by Turkic-speaking peoples and in particular the Kirghiz and the Kazakhs [Fielstrup, 2002, p. 109, 110]. Their temporary burials had a special name – *amanat*. Amanats were used only when circumstances made it necessary to put the dead somewhere, for example, among stones until there was a possibility to bury them with all the honors. In addition, “all the post-mortem rites are performed in the place of the death, and everything connected with the funeral – in the place of the funeral” [Fielstrup, 2002, p. 109]. Amanats of the Kazakhs are temporary burials in foreign lands, so that later the remains could be dug out and transferred to the homeland. Soft tissues were scraped away from the bones of already decomposed corpses with knives and transferred to the homeland in bags, where the bones were cleaned and a full burial rite was performed with them.

Secondary burials were practiced when travelers died on the road or “when in winter, if there is a lot of snow or if winter is very cold, the dead are buried in snow till spring and the burial place is enclosed with reeds” [Fielstrup, 2002, p. 110]. These situations in the burial practice of Sarmatian tribes cannot be excluded.

As shown by the results of studying skulls with perforations in burials of the Sarmatian time, their causes are different. It appears that therapeutic operations on two male skulls from the burial of Bykovo burial ground and from the burial of Don Region were carried out with the purpose associated with post-traumatic surgical intervention. In both cases the operations were successful, and the people lived long enough after the performed treatment.

As for the three skulls obtained from the burials of the Middle Sarmatian time (female skulls from Peregruznoe I, Verbovsky burial grounds and male skulls from Baranovka burial ground) and two Late Sarmatian ones, the operations were carried out as post-mortem or pre-mortem and most likely for ritual purposes. It is difficult to determine the significance of this kind of manipulation. The multiplicity of holes, their various diameters and inclination, specific localization of perforation, incomplete defects, all this can indicate various circumstances: inexperience of the person making these manipulations, haste during the operation, process of training skills, ritual actions, etc.

The peculiarities of performance of perforations in terms of materials of the Middle Sarmatian time make it possible to see the eastern origins, their direct analogues are found in materials of central and western Kazakhstan and southern Siberia. In case of therapeutic operations of the Sauromatian-Sarmatian time, the sources of these skills and knowledge most likely have a southwestern ancient origin, they could reach the territory of southeastern Siberia and Central Asia exactly through the steppe areas of the Lower Volga.

As for the rite of scalping, the search for analogies also led to synchronous cultures of southern Siberia, mound burials of Pazyryk, Aymyrlyg, Bystrovka burial grounds [Borodovsky, Tarabaev, 2001; Murphy et al., 2002; Murphy 2003]. As well as the Sarmatian materials, the materials of all 4 Siberian burial grounds have no traces of any inflammatory process indicating that the person lived at least some time after this procedure. Most likely these actions were taken in relation to already dead people or shortly before their death. No traces of additional manipulations on the bones of the skull were found. The person that carried out this operation probably acted

without haste and very carefully because no randomness is observed in the system of incisions on the examined skulls.

The cases of registration of notches on the bones of the cranial vault described according to the materials of Novy burial ground can be confidently interpreted as a consequence of military ritual scalping, which obviously was rarely practiced by the Sarmatians, as well as by the Scythians and the Alanes [Herodotus, IV, 64; Simon, Latyshev, 1952, p. 277; Ammianus Marcellinus XXXI, 2, 22].

The Sarmatians probably used skulls as glorious military trophies or towels. Moreover, human skin could serve as a material for creating clothes, masks and idols [Herodotus, IV, 64; Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI, 2, 22].

The comparative analysis of various aspects of deliberate deformation of the head among the Late Sarmatian population makes it possible to assume that they had behavioral and sociocultural motives similar to other regions and cultures, and the custom itself was a fashion for an elongated skull. The prestigious, communicative, social psychological and other functions of that fashion facilitated its establishment in the Late Sarmatian society.

Therefore, the analysis of the burial rite and the anthropological material of Sarmatian cultures

makes it possible to reconstruct uncommon rites, rituals and customs, which both are symbolic in nature and have a utilitarian and practical significance.

Unfortunately, the state of sources still makes us refrain from categorical judgements regarding the suggested ways of interpretation of the discussed burial complexes relating to the practice of prone burials and manipulations with the skulls.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> One of the authors of this article participated in the process of excavations and registered the position of the skeletons and their anatomical continuity.

<sup>3</sup> During one of the academic trips to Rostov-on-Don we happened to see and hold this fragment of the cup. We totally agree with E.F. Batieva that the given fragment is most likely to be a part of a human frontal bone.

<sup>4</sup> Classification of these burials with recording all the details was very often carried out already on site in the course of excavations, by the authors of the excavations or the authors of this article.

FIGURES

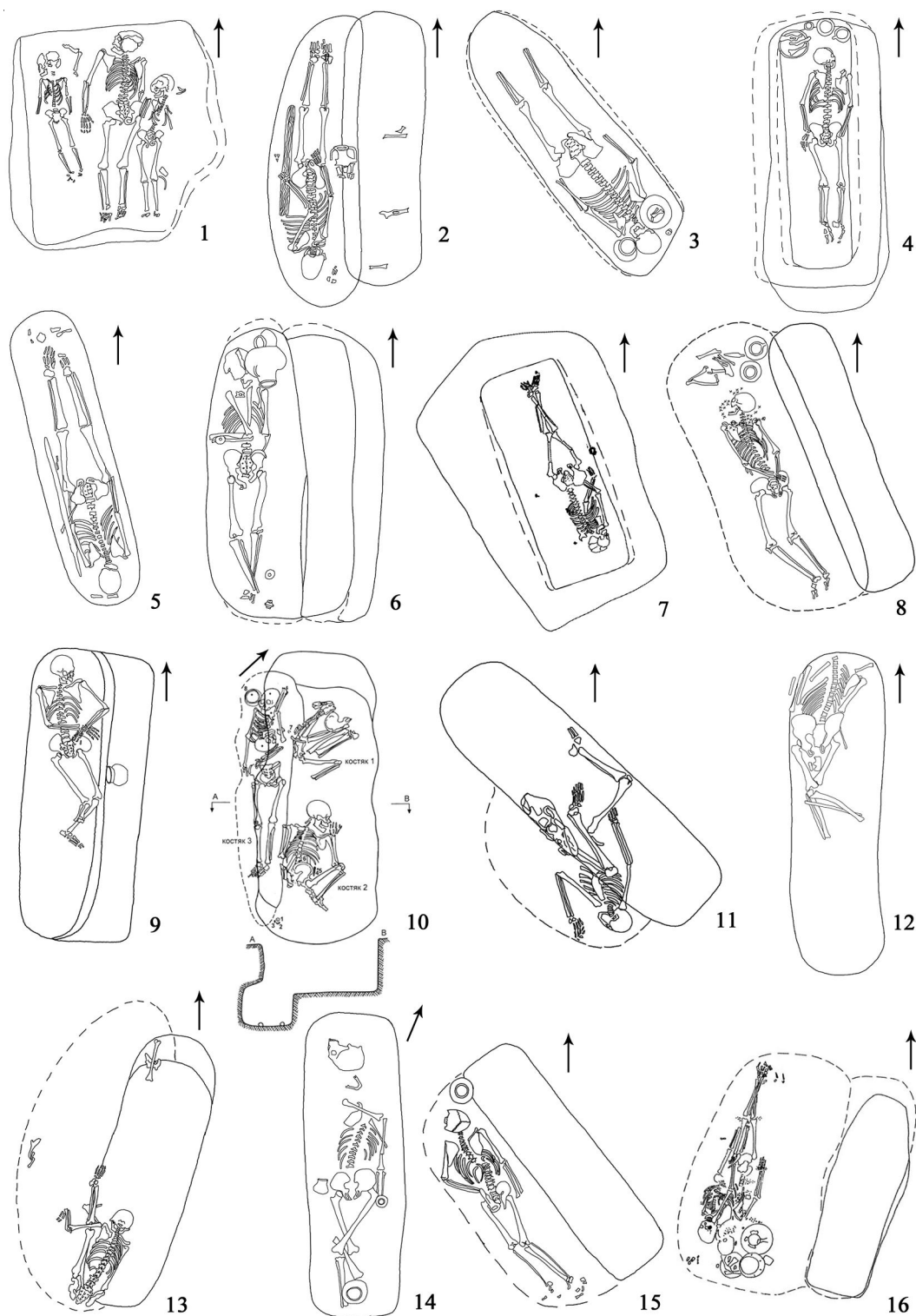


Fig. 1. Burials of the Late Sarmatian time carried out in a “face down”, “on the stomach” position:

- 1 – Khokhlatskiy, kurgan 2; 2 – Krivaya Luka XVI, kurgan 16; 3 – Krivaya Luka XVII, kurgan 49;  
 4 – Kirovskiy IV, kurgan 8; 5 – Channal track Volga-Chogray, kurgan 3; 6 – U-85, kurgan 9; 7 – Aksay-II, kurgan 35;  
 8 – Krivaya Luka X, kurgan 8, burial 2; 9 – Usatovo, kurgan F15; 10 – Selivanovskiy II, kurgan 6;  
 11 – Kuzin khutor, kurgan 28; 12 – Krivaya Luka XVII, kurgan 44; 13 – Krivaya Luka I, kurgan 2;  
 14 – Uyazybashevo, kurgan 4; 15 – Idzhil, kurgan 3; 16 – Aksay V, kurgan 4

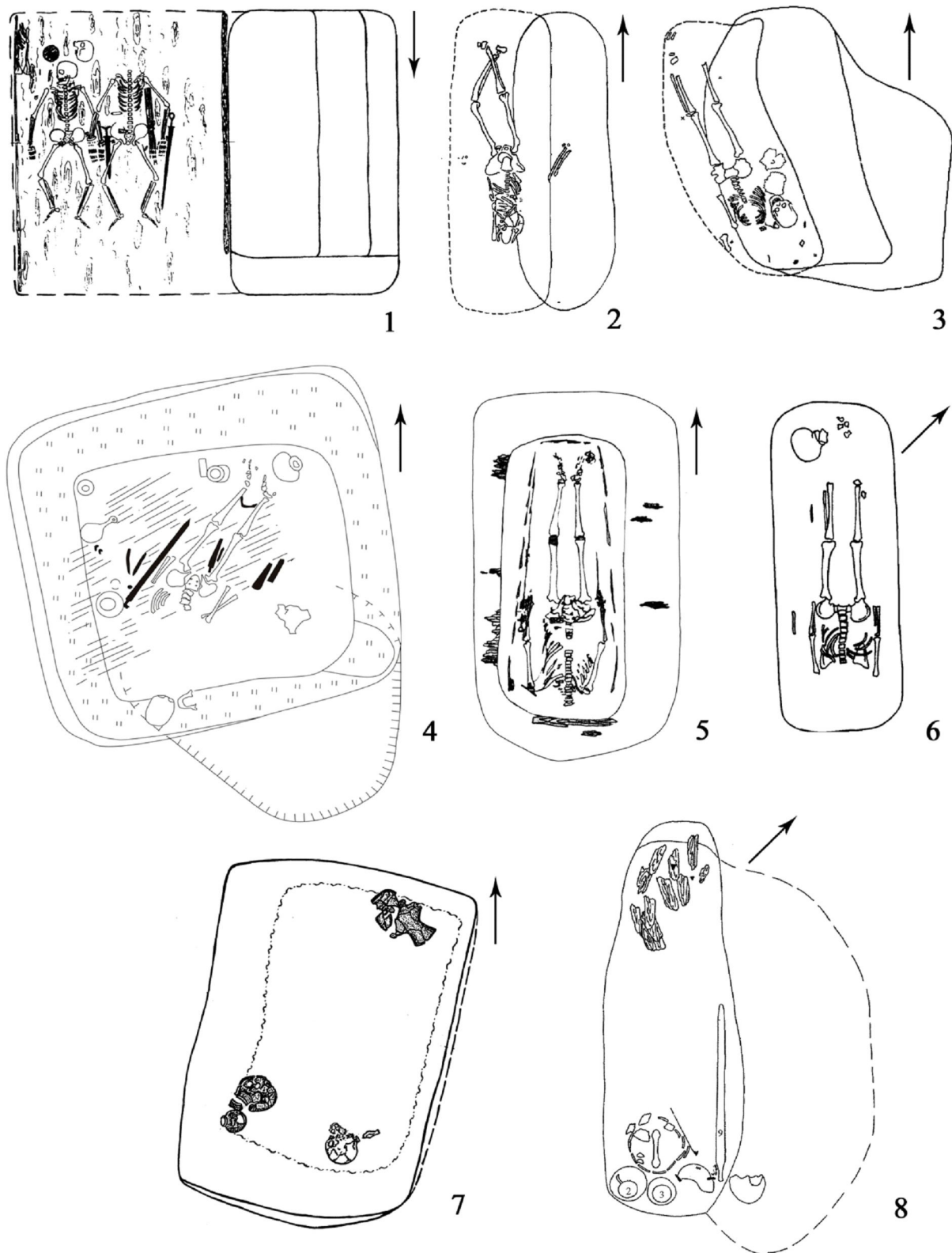


Fig. 2. Plans of Sarmatian burials with manipulations with skulls:

- 1 – Belokamenka II, kurgan 7, burial 3; 2 – Krivaya Luka XVII, kurgan 12, burial 1;  
 3 – Krivaya Luka XVII, kurgan 17, burial 1; 4 – Sladkovka, kurgan 12, burial 1; 5 – Petrunino II, kurgan 14, burial 1;  
 6 – Avilovskiy II, kurgan 23, burial 1; 7 – Nedostupov, kurgan 2, burial 1; 8 – Salomatino I, kurgan 4, burial 1

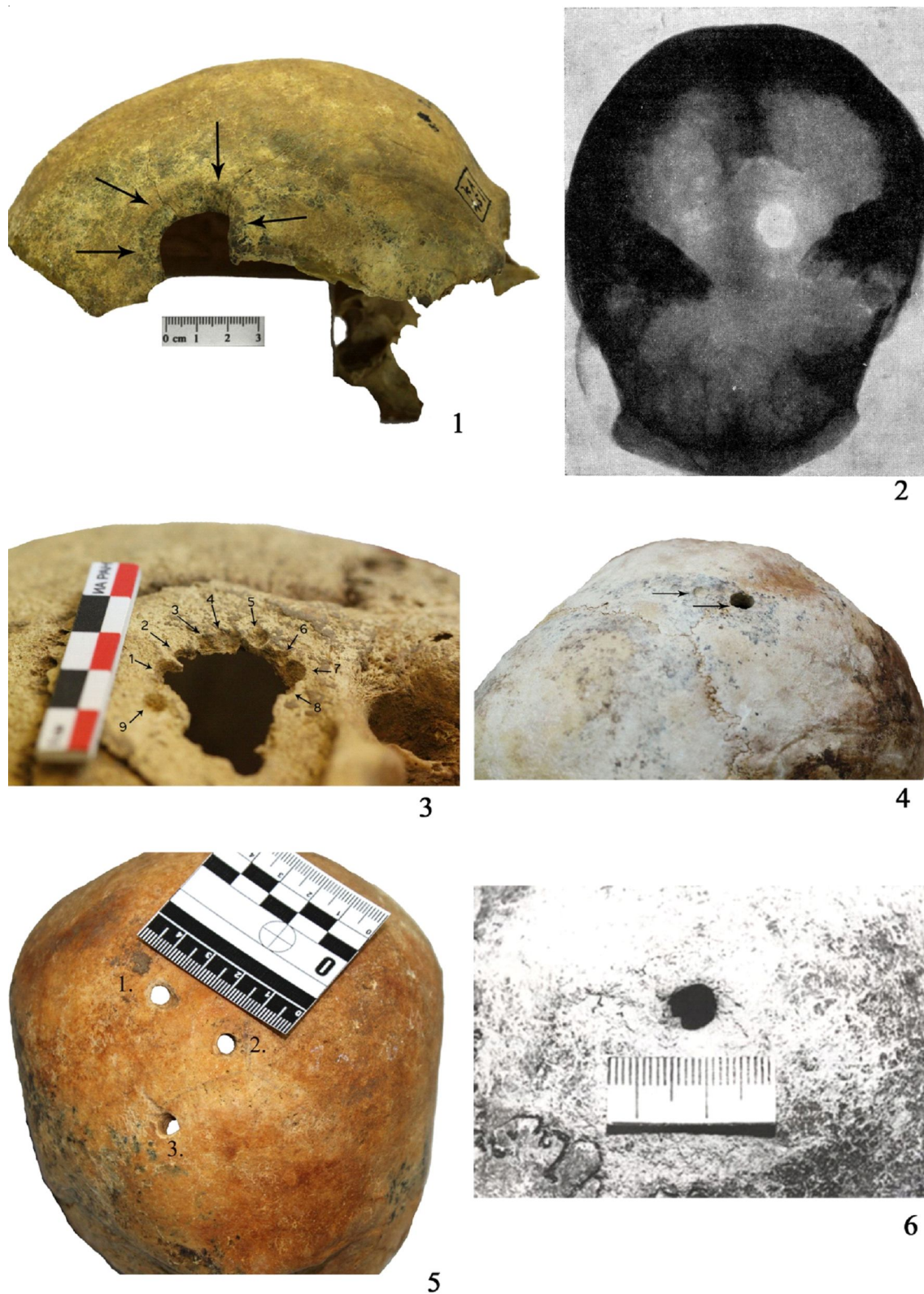
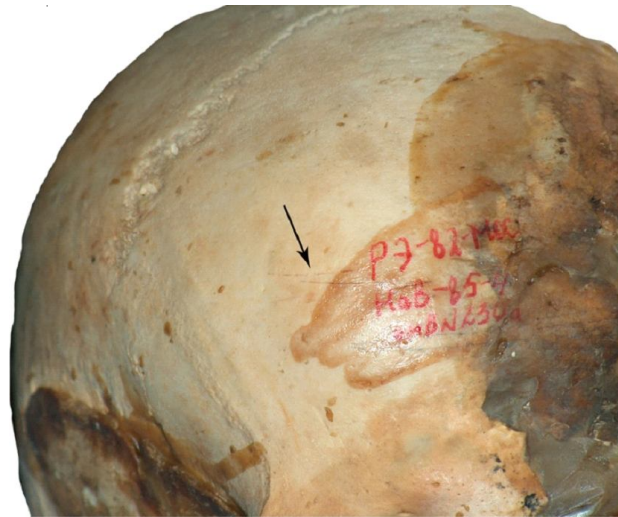


Fig. 3. Skulls with traces of trepanation:

1 – Bykovo, kurgan 13, burial 4; 2 – Don region (the find comes from the kurgans of the flood zone of the future Tsimlyansk reservoir, which were excavated by units of the Volga-Don archaeological expedition led by M.I. Artamonov in 1949–1951); 3 – Baranovka, kurgan 21, burial 2; 4 – Peregruznoe I, kurgan 45, burial 3; 5 – Verbovskiy, kurgan 26, burial 1; 6 – Glazunovskiy II, kurgan 4, burial 1





1



2



3

Fig. 4. Traces of scalping on skulls from Novy burial ground:  
1 – skull of a young man (20–25 years old) from burial 4 of kurgan 85;  
2 – skull of a young woman (17–19 years old) from burial 4 of kurgan 85;  
3 – skull of a man (30–35 years old) from burial 8 of kurgan 129

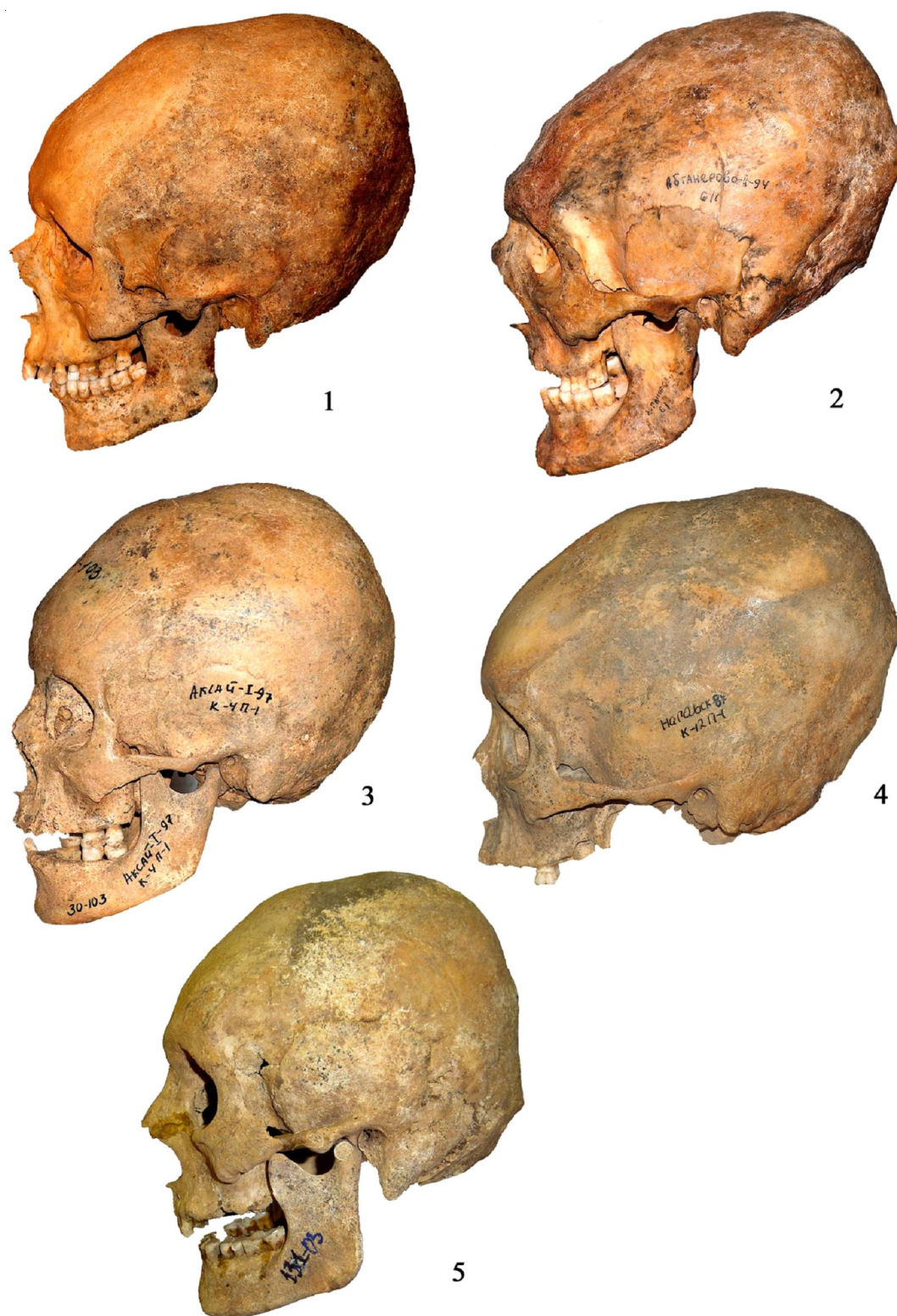


Fig. 5. Traces of artificial deformation of skulls:

- 1 – skull of a man (20–25 years old) from the mound 6 of burial ground Kovylnov III;
- 2 – the skull of a man (30–40 years old) from the mound 6 of burial ground Abganerovo II;
- 3 – the skull of a woman (14–16 years old) from the mound 4 of burial ground Aksay I;
- 4 – the skull of a woman (16–18 years old) from the barrow 12 of Nagavskiy II burial ground;
- 5 – skull of a man (40–50 years old) from the mound 3 of Plemkhoz burial ground



Fig. 6. A fragment of a bowl from a human skull from Krepostnoe Gorodishche burial ground  
(after: [Batieva, 2004])



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