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BOSPORAN CAVALRY DURING THE WAR OF MITHRIDATES III (VIII) WITH ROME, 45-49 A.D.¹

The history of the Bosporan kingdom during the first centuries A.D. was sated by war. In spite of this fact, only one coherent narrative about any military campaign fought by the Bosporan army in which cavalry played an essential role has survived from Antiquity. This is the description of the struggle for the throne fought between the two brothers Mithridates III (VIII) and Kotys in Tacitus' *Annals* (XII. 15-21). Hostilities began in A.D. 45, when Kotys, having secured the support of the emperor Claudius, returned home with a Roman army comprising not less than one legion.² His rival was forced onto the Asian side of the Cimmerian Bosporus and concluded an alliance with Zorsines, the chief of the Siraces, a Sarmatian tribe.

During the campaign of A.D. 45/46 the Romans ousted Mithridates from Bosporan territory. During this period their main forces, led by the general Didius Gallus, handed over the kingdom to the possession of their ally. The rival king, however, had no intention of laying down his arms. He stirred up the Barbarian tribes in revolt against his younger brother. Eventually Mithridates, having banished the chief of the Dandarians, came to rule the whole area on the eastern border of the state. In A.D. 49 Kotys and some cohorts under the command of Iulius Acvila launched a pre-emptive attack on their opponent. One notes that in the passage of Tacitus concerning the structure of

the allied army, apart from the Romans, only the Bosporan forces, who were armed after the Roman fashion, are mentioned in the narrative. Judging from appearances the allies did not pin great hopes on their own forces in the forthcoming campaign, for they had no horsemen which were capable of resisting the Siracian cavalry, either in number or quality of armament. Successful military action in the region of Lake Maiotis could only be guaranteed if the support of the Aorsi, who were hostile to the Siraces, could be ensured. Thus "it was agreed, that Eunones [king of the Aorsi] would throw his cavalry upon the enemy, whereas the Romans will engage in the siege of the cities" (Tac., *Ann.* XII. 15). The allied army marched in the following formation: the Roman and Bosporan military units were stationed in the centre, whilst the Aorsi acted as the vanguard and rearguard, always ready to take up the first attack. Actually the same marching order is also described some 90 years later by Arrian in his work "Disposition against the Alans", which concerns events in A.D. 135, when this Sarmatian tribe launched a raid into the territory of the Roman province of Cappadocia.³ The recommendations which the author gives can at the very least be considered to reflect the experience acquired by the Bosporan army in battles with their nomad neighbours.

According to Tacitus military action was delayed until the allies reached the land of the Siraces. Only then did Zorsines release his hostages and recognized the authority of Rome. The loss of the Siracian cavalry in turn forced the capitulation of Mithridates. These events once again emphasized the value of barbarian allied cavalry when conducting largescale military op-

¹ This work has been completed thanks to the financial support of the institution "Open society. Fund of Assistance" (grant No.NATO 75).

² E. S. Golubtsova, *Severnoe Prichernomor'e i Rim na rubezhe n.e.* (The Northern Black Sea Coast and Rome at the Turn of the Christian Era), Moskva 1951, pp. 128 ff.; V. D. Blavatskii, *O rimskikh voiskakh na Tavricheskom poluoostrove v I v. n.e.* (Concerning Roman forces on the Tauric peninsula in the 1st century A.D.), [in:] *Antichnaya archeologiya i istoriya*, Moskva 1985, p. 228; M. B. Shchukin, *Na rubezhe er* (On the turn of the Eras), St.-Petersburg 1994, p. 205.

³ A. K. Nefiodkin, *Kampaniya Arriana po otrazheniyu alanskogo nabega na Kappadokiyu v 135 g* (Arrian's campaign against the Alans's foray in Cappadocia in 135 A.D.), "STRATUM plus", vol. 3, Kishinev 1999, p. 187.



erations on the borders of the Bosporan kingdom. Previous rulers of the Bosporan state had understood this lesson. It seems that Asandros (47-17 B.C.) had previously ceded some territory between Gorgippia and Phanagoria to the Aspurgians.⁴ The Aspurgians were a tribal group belonging to the Sarmatian Nomad world. What new element had entered the sphere of warfare on the Bosphorus along with them?

A contemporary assemblage of cavalry arms and equipment is depicted on the grave-stele of



Fig. 1. Gravestone of Matianes – Temryuk museum.

Matianes, son of Zaidares (Fig. 1), which was found in the area of the mouth of the river Kuban (ancient Hypanis).⁵ It is a quite unique object, for the gravestone was erected on his behalf by Queen Dynamis “for the sake of his memory”. This fact suggests that the deceased had some special merits and especially close links to the ruling house. Most probably he was one of the chiefs of the Aspurgians, who played an important role in the events of the end of the 1st century B.C. It was

during this period that Polemon, the protege of the Roman general Marcus Agrippa, conducted a military campaign against the Bosporan state.

Obviously the stele is not the work not of an ordinary craftsman. The sculptor has recorded a number of distinct ethnographic details in the dress of the deceased. The warrior is shown clad in high leather boots, and his horse is shown with a crenellated mane and with a leather cover for the tail. All these features place the equipment of the deceased in an eastern Nomadic environment, for they were not in common use within the territory of Bosporan kingdom. Indeed the crenellated mane, apart from the relief currently under examination, is only observed on one other relief.⁶ Later on it is shown in the second century A.D. tomb frescoes from Pantikapaion on the horses used by the mounted opponents of the Bosporans.⁷ The nearest region to the Cimmerian Bosphorus where this feature can be observed is the Lower Volga, where it appears on the engraved figures decorating a silver vessel coming from a tomb of the 1st century A.D. found at the village of Kosika in the Astrakhan region.⁸ The distribution of earlier analogies to this feature is much wider, stretching from Pazyryk as far as China⁹ Horsemen’s high boots,¹⁰ and leather covers for the horses’ tails¹¹ are typical throughout the whole of this area.

As far as we know the horseman shown on the stele of Matianes stele is the earliest image of

⁶ T. A. Matkovskaya, *Masterskie nadgrobnoye rel’efa Evropeiskogo Bospora I v. do n.e. - 2 v. n. e.* (Funerary Relief Workshops of the European Bosphorus, 1st century B.C. - 2nd century A.D.), “Soobshcheniya Gosudarstvennogo Muzeya Izobrazitel’nykh Iskusstv”, vol. 10, 1992, p. 404, tabl. 5, 7.

⁷ M. I. Rostovtsev, *Antichnaya dekorativnaya zhivopis na juge Rossii* (Classical decorative painting of the South of Russia), Sankt-Peterburg 1914, tabl. 64, 1; 79.

⁸ M. J. Treister, *Sarmatskaya shkola khudozhestvennoi toreviki* (The Sarmatian School of Artistic Toreutics), “Vestnik drevnei istorii”, 2, 1994, p. 180, fig. 7.

⁹ O. Maenchen-Helfen, *Crenellated mane and scabbard slide*, “Central Asiatic Journal”, vol. 3, 2, 1957, pp. 95-137; J. Rawson, *Mysteries of ancient China. New discoveries from the Early Dynasties*, London 1996, fig. 100b.

¹⁰ S. A. Yatsenko, *Kostyum plemen pazyryksoi kul’tury Gornogo Altaya kak istoricheskii istochnik* (Costume of the Tribes of the Pazyryk Culture of the Mountainous Altai as a historical source), “Vestnik Drevnei Istorii”, 3, 1999, pp. 163-164, fig. 1.

¹¹ B. I. Marshak, *Iskusstvo Sogda* (Art of Sogd), [in:] *Tsentral’naya Aziya. Pamyatniki pismennosti i iskusstva* (Central Asia. Monuments of written language and art), Moskva 1987, pp. 235-236.

⁴ Historiography of this question see: S. J. Saprykin, *Aspurgiane* (Aspurgians), “Sovetskaya arkheologiya”, 2, 1985, p. 65 ff.

⁵ V. P. Yailenko, *Zhenshchiny, Afrodita i zhritsa Spartokidov v novykh bosporskikh nadpisyakh* (Women, Aphrodite and priestess of Spartokidians in the new Bosporan inscriptions), [in:] *Zhenshchina v antichnom mire* (Woman in the Classical World), Moskva 1995, pp. 220-224.



Fig. 2. Detail from the painting of Anphesterios' tomb with the images of horsemen.

a cataphract in Bosporan art. The grave stele of Athenaios is not quite as early, for it is dated to the 1st century A.D. (*Korpus bosporskikh nadpisei* 332), and generally not later than the middle of the century.¹² On our relief the horseman wears a short coat of armour with a cut at the bottom. He holds the horse's reins in his left hand, and a long spear in his right hand. It is raised upwards, i.e. it is shown not in its battle position, when it needed to be held by both hands, but in its marching position, with a support, probably of basically wooden construction, attached to the horizontal ledge of the saddle, which is quite precisely shown. On the right side of the figure an unstrung bow of "Hunnic" type together with a quiver for the arrows is shown. Similar bows occur within the territory of Bosporan kingdom at this time, and likewise throughout the zone of the Asian steppes.¹³ On the Bosporan frescoes and reliefs they are always worn near to a quiver on the right thigh.

It is interesting to note that a number of details shown in the image of the horseman from the stele of Matianes are repeated on a fresco from the Tomb of Anphesterios from Pantikapaion. This fresco, dating to somewhere between the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the second century A.D., shows the departure of a horseman (Fig. 2). The warrior represented here, besides a long spear, which his armour-bearer carries behind him, is armed with a long sword.¹⁴ The fact that the shape of the sword is somewhat

reminiscent of a sabre is probably a due to distortion on the part of the artist, who copied the fresco in 1877. The subject of the painting of Anphesterios's tomb and the conventions used by the original artist are probably attributable to Sarmatian re-ligious concepts (travel in the next world) and artistic traditions.¹⁵ It may well be the case, therefore, that a representative of the Aspurgian nobility was buried there. Probably he was not the only noble Aspurgian who was buried in the necropolis of Pantikapaion. It is interesting that in the immediate vicinity of Anphesterios's tomb were two other burial monuments (the Tomb of Alkimos and The 1891 Tomb) demonstrating amazing similarity both in their architectural form and in the style of painting. We may perhaps be permitted to presume that this area of the Pantikapaion necropolis was occupied by members of the Aspurgian nobility, who were either included in the structure of the ruling elite, or who performed military service in the capital among the king's guards. The Aspurgians could furnish the Bosporan army with units of armoured cavalry, whereas the citizenry were only able to supply light cavalry.

No dramatic changes can be observed in cavalry weapons or horse furniture as shown on funerary reliefs from Pantikapaion at the turn of the millenium.¹⁶ As earlier a bow of "Scythian" type

¹² J. M. Desyatchikov, *Katafraktarii na nadgrobii Afenia* (Cataphract on the Gravestone of Athenios), "Sovetskaya Arkheologiya", 4, 1972, p. 74; M. Miellczarek, *The Army of the Bosporan kingdom*, Lodz 1999, pp. 87-88.

¹³ A. M. Khazanov, *Ocherki voennogo dela sarmatov* (Essays of Sarmatian Warfare), Moskva 1971, p. 31.

¹⁴ M. I. Rostovtsev, *Antichnaya dekorativnaya zhivopis'* ..., p. 182, tabl. 51, 6.

¹⁵ S. A. Yatsenko, *O sarmato-alanskom syuzhete rospisi v pantikapeiskom "sklepe Anfesteriya"* (Upon the Sarmatian-Alan subject in the Painting from Pantikapaion's "tomb of Anphesterios"), "Vestnik drevnei istorii", 3, 1995, pp. 189-192.

¹⁶ J. J. Marti, *Pozdneellinisticheskie nadgrobiya Bospora kak istoriko-kul'turnyi dokument* (Late Hellenistic Gravestones of the Bosporus as a Historical and Cultural Document), "Sovetskaya arkheologiya", 7, 1941, pp. 36,40, fig. 7,11; L. I. Davydova, *Bosporskie nadgrobnye rel'efy 5 v. do n.e. - 3 v. n.e. Katalog vystavki* (Bosporan Funerary Reliefs from the 5th century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. Catalogue of the Exhibition), Leningrad 1990, N 43,44.

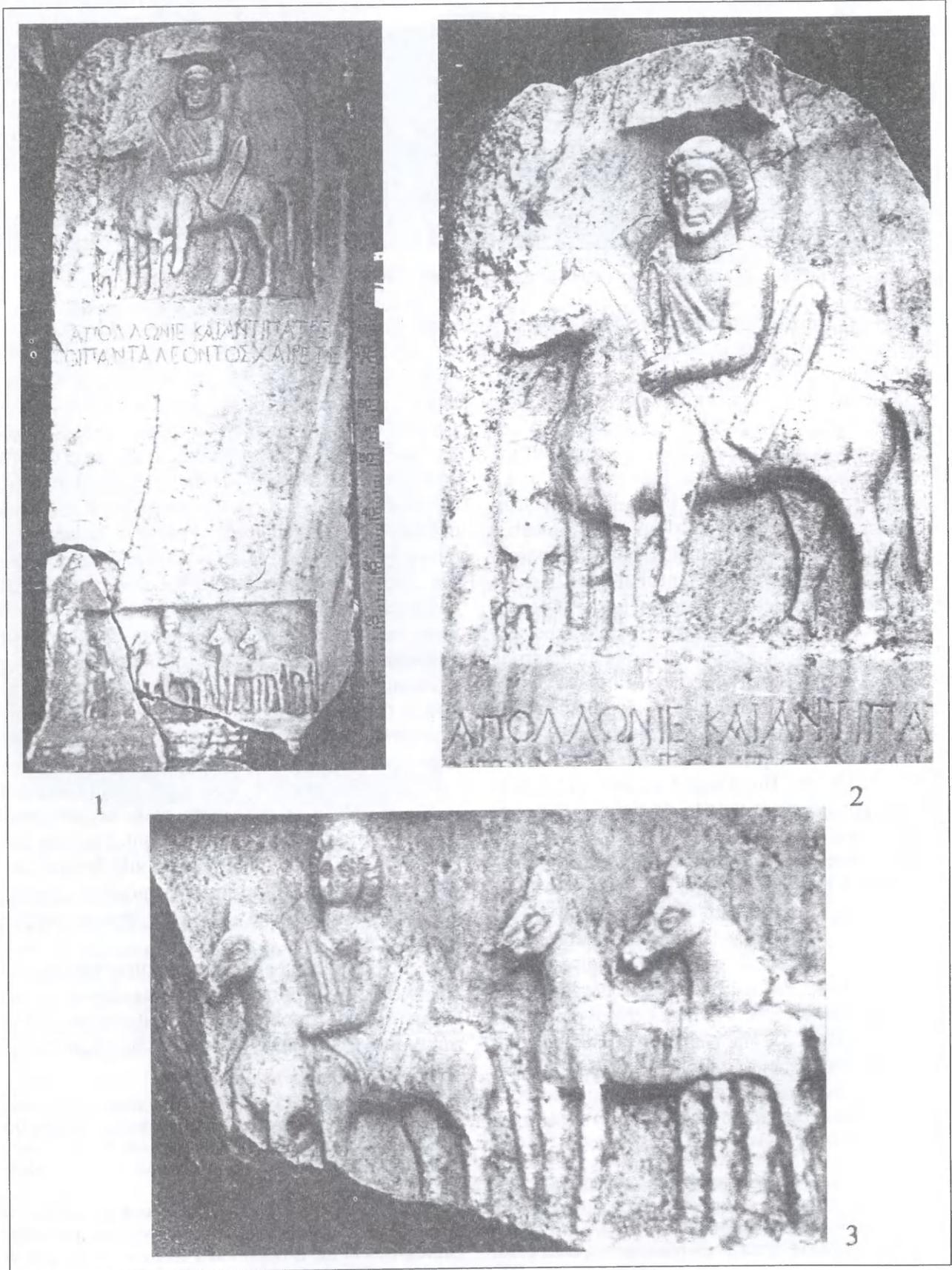


Fig. 3. Marble stele of the sons of Pantaleontos from Gorgippia: 1 – general view; 2 – top relief; 3 – fragment of the bottom relief.

with strongly recurved ears continues to be used. Unlike bow of "Hunnic" type it is carried in a gorytos on the left thigh, strung in the tense position ready for shooting. On the other hand, the occurrence of new elements of arms and equipment can be noted on some monuments of this period from cities close to the lands occupied by the Aspurgians. The earliest find of a long sword comes from a tomb of the first century A.D. from the necropolis of Phanagoria.¹⁷ The marble gravestone of Apollonios and Antipatros, sons of Pantaleontos (Fig. 3), from Gorgippia, dating to around the end of the first century B.C.,¹⁸ is also worthy of note. In the upper part of the stele there is a relief showing a horseman with a bow of "Scythian" type. A young warrior sits in a saddle which has a forward saddle bow slightly bent forward and decorated with a relief pattern. On the bottom relief the same horseman holds the reins of two saddled horses. The saddles, the basic elements of which could have been constructed of wood¹⁹, have vertical ledges with the slightly convex surface of a pillow at the front and back. The closest analogies for saddles of this type are shown on representations of horses in Parthian terracottas and on a relief of around the turn of the millenium from the temple of Baalshamin in Sia.²⁰ This type of saddle, with its so-called "horns", afforded a steady "deep" seat to the rider and was connected with the increasing of importance of armoured cavalry. It was important for horsemen of this type to remain in the saddle after colliding with their opponent. In the absence of stirrups the design of the saddle was developed to perform this task. The projecting ledges at the back of the saddle gave good support for the lower back and thighs of horseman.

A similar type of "horned" saddle was also used by Roman cavalry somewhat later on. A

reconstruction of a leather saddle from Valkenburg (Holland) has shown the remarkably high efficiency of the "horns", which do not interfere in the use of spear, sword or bow.²¹ It is interesting to note that the saddles which are represented on the pedestal of a marble gravestone of the second century A.D. from Gorgippia²² (Fig. 4, 3) corresponds practically completely with the reconstruction mentioned above. The wooden framework of such saddles could be additionally strengthened with bronze plates to give the "horns" greater rigidity.²³ The capabilities of the mounted warrior in cavalry combat increased dramatically. He could feel confident enough in the saddle even without stirrups.

A certain contribution to these developments was also made within the territory of the Bosporan kingdom, but at a somewhat later date. After the second half of the first century A.D. most Bosporan reliefs with images of horsemen display an original type of "deep" saddle with a massive front part which finishes in rounded ledges, which bend inside under the form of thigh. They protected the bottom part of the warrior's trunk. The back of the saddle was furnished with vertical ledges or a rear arch.²⁴ This rear arch is shown in most detail on a fragment of a gravestone of the first or second century A.D. in the collections of Temryuk museum (Fig. 4 – 4,5). Perhaps a saddle with elements of a wooden framework is being shown here. Its appearance on the Bosporus is surely due to eastern influence.

I now return to our original theme, the Bosporan war of 45-49 A.D. It would be reasonable to assume that there was continuity in the political inclinations of the Aspurgian nobility from the

¹⁷ N. I. Sokol'skii, *Bosporskie mechi* (Bosporan Swords), "Materialy i issledovaniya po arkheologii SSSR", 33, 1954, p. 155, tabl. 5, 1.

¹⁸ V. A. Goroncharovskii, *Nadgrobie synovei Pantaleonta iz Gorgippii* (Gravestone of Pantaleontos's sons from Gorgippia), [in:] *Bosporskii fenomen: grecheskaia kul'tura na periferii antichnogo mira* (Bosporan phenomenon: Greek culture on the periphery of Classical World), St.-Petersburg 1999, p. 176.

¹⁹ Compare: P. Connolly, *Roman Saddle. Roman Military Equipment. The Accoutrements of War*, "British Archaeological Report", International Series, 336, 1987, p. 7.

²⁰ R. Ghirshman, *La selle en Iran*, "Iranica Antiqua", 10, 1973, p. 103, fig. 6.

²¹ P. Connolly, *Roman Saddle. Roman ...*, pp. 8-17; J. C. Coulston Roman, *Parthian and Sassanid tactical developments. Defence of the Roman Army in the East*,

"British Archaeological Report", International Series, 297 (i), 1986, pp. 61-62.

²² S. I. Vainshtein, *Mir kochevnikov Tsentra Azii* (World of the Nomads of Central Asia), Moskva 1991, p. 220, fig. 96, 4.

²³ P. Connolly, *The saddle horns from Newstead*, "Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies", 1, 1990, p. 61 ff., fig. 1-5.

²⁴ V. A. Goroncharovskii, *Kavaleriya pozdneantichnogo Bospora* (Cavalry of the Late Classical Bosporus), [in:] *Bospor Kimmeriiskii: na perekrest'e grecheskogo i varvarskogo mirov* (Cimmerian Bosporus: on the Crossroads of the Greek and Barbarian Worlds), Kertch 2000, p. 54.

²⁵ S. J. Saprykin, *Mitridatovskie traditsii v politike Bospora na rubezhe nashei ery* (Mithridates' Legacy in the politics of the Bosporus on the turn of the Millenium), [in:] *Antichnost' i varvarskii mir* (Antiquity and the Barbarian World), Ordzhonikidze 1985, p. 63 ff.; idem, *Pontiiskoe tsarstvo*, Moskva 1996, p. 334.

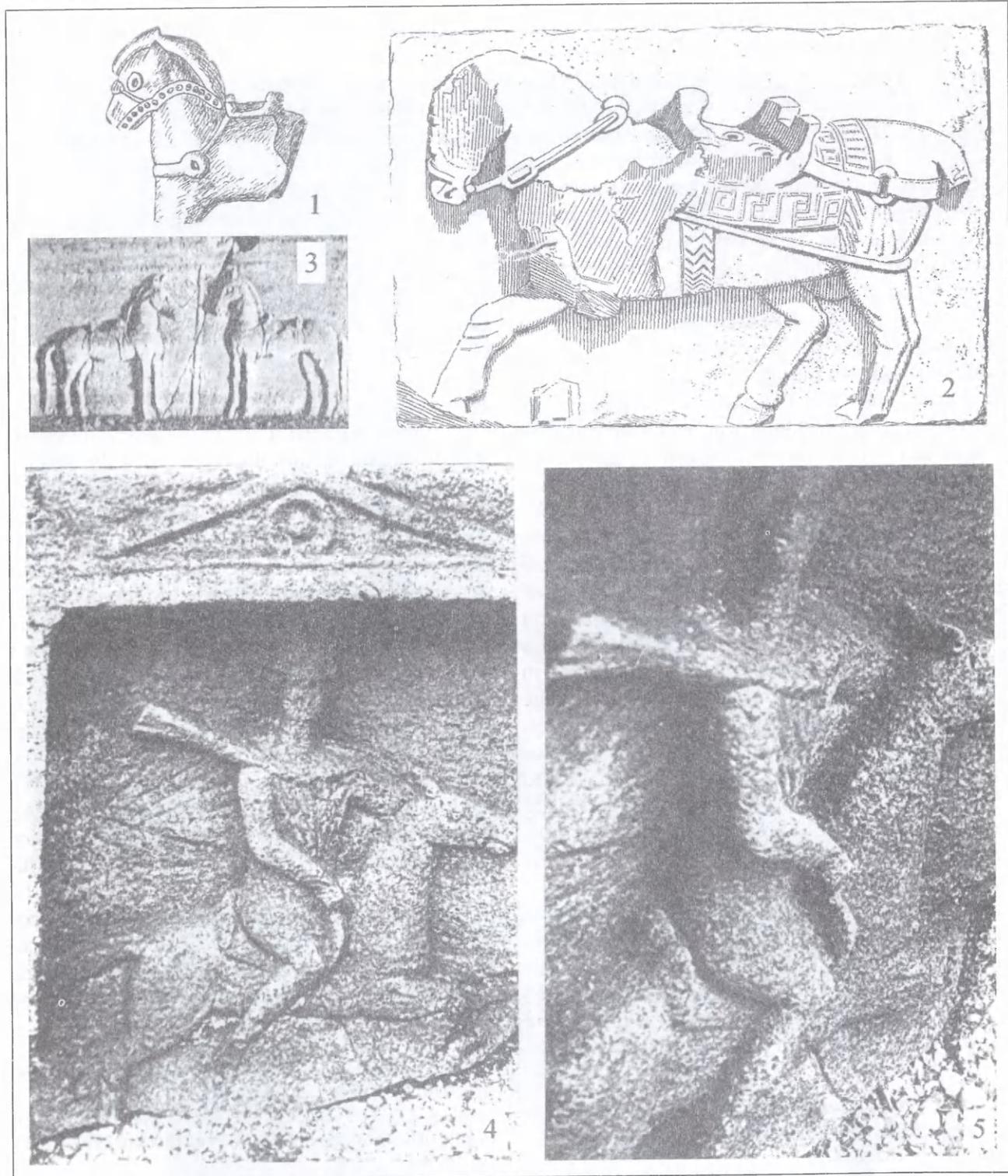


Fig. 4. Representations of saddles of the first and second centuries A.D.: 1 – terracotta figure of a horse from Masdjid-i-Suleiman; 2 – relief from the temple of Baalshamin in Sia; 3 – relief on the pediment of the gravestone from Gorgippia; 4 – gravestone with an image of a horseman (Temryuk museum); 5 – fragment of the same relief (shown in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile).

times of Mithridates VI.²⁵ They could not support the successor to his cause and the bearer of the same name. As a result the opponents of the rebel Bosporan king, probably for the first time, found themselves without armoured cavalry, and in a dangerous military position in the steppes east of the Azov coast. It is possible that the formation

of the first units of the cataphracts from the ranks of the Bosporan citizenry began soon after the end of these military actions. This development is reflected in the frescoes and grave reliefs from the necropolises of Pantikapaion and other cities.

Thus, the events of the middle of the first century A.D. currently under discussion had dramatic

consequences not only for the ethnic makeup on the Northern Black Sea coast,²⁶ because they caused the movement of a number of Sarmatian tribes, but also for warfare in the Bosporan kingdom. Subsequently the use of heavy plate or scale

armour, along with the appropriate set of weapons, seems to come into widespread use among the richer members of Bosporan society. Earlier it was characteristic only for barbarians in Bosporan service.

²⁶ M. B. Shchukin, *Na rubezhe er*, p. 206 ff.; T. A. Gabuev, *Rannyaya istoriya alan* (Early history of the Alans), Vladikavkaz 1999, p. 130 ff.

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