



Academician G.F. Miller and the Treasures from Litoi Kurgan¹

Irina V. Tunkina

Abstract

The burial-mound “Litoi Kurgan” was excavated in 1763 on the instructions of Lieutenant-General A.P. Mel’gunov 30 kilometres from the fortress of Saint Elizabeth (now known as Kirovgrad, Ukraine). It contained an assemblage of gold and silver articles of the Early Scythian period: examples of oriental metal-work and articles which had been fashioned in accordance with the traditions of the Scythian Animal Style. The prestigious nature of these finds was on a par with the grave-goods found in royal Scythian burial-mounds. The artefacts were presented to Empress Catherine II, who commanded that Academician G.F. Miller (1705-1783) should draw up a description of them and that they should be held in the *Kunstammer* of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. One hundred years later the hoard was transferred in installments to the Hermitage Museum. In this article information regarding the assemblage from the Litoi Kurgan site is pieced together on the basis of archive documents and publications dating from the 18th and 19th century. Modern interpretations of this information and attempts to date the finds are also included: some of the artefacts were transferred from the Hermitage to museums in Kharkov and then lost during the Second World War. It is precisely with the excavations of the Litoi Kurgan burial-mound that the birth of a separate branch of archaeology is associated – namely Scythian studies. Litoi Kurgan is one of the sites from the Scythian Archaic period, which link together the Dnieper region and the Northern Caucasus. It is possible that it is a cenotaph burial-mound associated with the era of the Scythian campaigns into the Near East and dating from the second half of the 7th century BC.

Keywords

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Among the Scythian finds associated with the Archaic period in the North Pontic region, one which occupies a special place is the so-called Melgunov hoard – a funerary assemblage from the Litoi Kurgan site nearly 50 kilometres from the fortress of St. Elizabeth (modern Kirovgrad in the Ukraine) (Fig.1).

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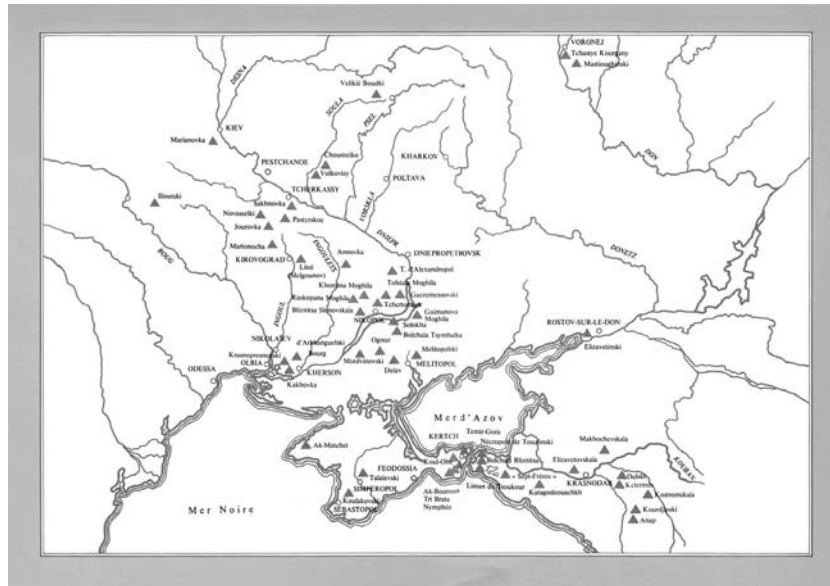


Fig. 1. Map of Scythian Burial-mounds in the North Pontic Region (reproduced from Galanina, Grach & Piotrovski 1986, 10-11).

The hoard has been dated by some scholars to the middle or third quarter (broadly speaking – to the second half) of the 7th century and by others to the end of the 7th or beginning of the 6th century BC.² The hoard was excavated in September 1763 in accordance with a directive from Lt. General A.P. Melgunov and it contained an Early Scythian assemblage of gold and silver articles of lasting scientific significance. The articles thus found were brought to St. Petersburg either by A.P. Melgunov himself³ or, on his instructions, by Colonel Andrei Irman, the commander of the Saint Elizabeth fortress, and presented to Empress Catherine II.⁴ In accordance with a personal decree from

² For the first date, see: Alekseev 1992, 52, 96; 2003, 295; Ivanchik 2001, 282, Note 1. For the traditional, but now virtually obsolete, second date, see: Artamonov 1966, 18, 91; Il'inskaya & Terenozhkin 1983, 104; Murzin 1984, 19-20; Melyukova 1989, 54.

³ G.F. Miller refers to this himself: "While... they were digging, they found... a spot containing jewellery, weapons and various articles, which His Excellency General Melgunov brought here and which are described below". See: Miller (Müller) 1764, 502-503. Cf. Miller (Müller) 1899, 144.

⁴ This is borne out by a document from the archive of the Saint Elizabeth fortress, according to which A.P. Melgunov issued instructions: "after receiving the said items, transmit them for

the Empress, the articles were transferred to the Imperial St.-Petersburg Academy of Sciences and first described by Academician Gerhard Friedrich Müller (in Russia – Fedor Ivanovich Miller, 1705-1783), who at that time was the Conference Secretary of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (1754-1765).⁵ Miller was to write: “Her Imperial Majesty, in keeping with her ineffable curiosity with regard to science, was pleased to inform me in respect of these articles of her instruction for me to compose some explanations about them, in particular about the peoples, to whom they might be ascribed, and also about the state of the places and graves, from which they were removed”. These “explanations” were graciously received by the Empress and “I was granted royal permission to make them public in printed form for lovers of history [. . .]. Although herein [i.e. in the author’s study – I.T.] I refer to drawings, they cannot be appended here. The articles themselves, in accordance with a decree from Her Imperial Majesty, have been transferred to the Imperial *Kunstammer*”.⁶

It is by no means a coincidence that Catherine II entrusted the description of the finds precisely to G.F. Miller. During the period when he had been taking part in the work of the academic team of the Second Kamchatka Expedition (1733-1743) he had paid careful attention to the collection of antiquities for the *Kunstammer* and the recording of archaeological sites in Siberia, although he himself “was not so happy about these rare objects having been found in ancient graves”.⁷

Melgunov had evidently given instructions for a number of the finds from Litoi Kurgan to be cleaned and “restored” once they had reached St. Petersburg: for example, fragments of the gold facing from the sheath of a sword were fastened on to a wooden base. That was the state they were in when Miller first saw them, but Melgunov’s “reconstruction”, as indeed the interpretation of the functions for which the antiquities had been designed and that of the depictions on them as proposed by Miller, sometimes turned out to be erroneous. The first person to draw attention to this was the man who first published the Melgunov hoard, namely the senior curator Department for Antiquities, Evgenii Martynovich Pridik of the Imperial Hermitage (1865-1935).

dispatch to Petersburg and presentation to Her Imperial Majesty to the commandant, Colonel Irman”. See: Tunkina 1998, 21.

⁵ Miller (Müller) 1764, 483-415. German translation: Müller 1779, 3-29.

⁶ Miller (Müller) 1764, 483-484.

⁷ Müller (Müller) 1764, 485.

First a few words about the man who initiated the excavations at Litoi Kurgan. Lt. General Alexei Petrovich Melgunov (1722-1788), a courtier close to Peter III, was the only one of those intimately associated with Catherine the Great's husband who was arrested for a few days after the palace revolution of 1762 and then sent to join the Ukrainian Army, which was virtually the same as being sentenced to internal exile. Yet a mere two years later – at the beginning of 1764 – the Empress approved the plan Melgunov had drawn up for the settlement and administrative organization of New Serbia⁸ and moreover appointed him as governor general of extensive lands in the South of the Empire, which had come to be known as the Novorossiiskaya Province and which he was to administer until 1774. Having learned to value A.P. Melgunov's abilities for what they were worth, the Empress granted him a royal pardon and called him back to St. Petersburg. His career made even more rapid strides in connection with the fact that he was on close terms with the favorites of Catherine II, in particular G.A. Potemkin. In 1765 Melgunov was made a member of the Commission for Land Surveys and a senator for the Moscow Department of the civil service, President of the Board of Revenues (1765-1777), a member of the Commission convened to draw up a new *ulozhenie* or code of laws (1767) and then director of the state distilleries. To judge from what followed, in the 1770s A.P. Melgunov turned out to have more liberal ideas than the Empress herself and thus came to oppose the shift in Catherine the Great's domestic policy and to her abandonment of the planned reforms. This had an immediate impact on his subsequent career: in 1777 he had to say farewell to the capital for ever after being appointed as governor first of Yaroslavl and Vologda (the following year he was the first governor of Kostroma and in 1779 governor of Archangelsk Province). In the history of the 18th century A.P. Melgunov is remembered as a prominent statesman, influential administrator and patron of the arts.⁹

It is likely that Litoi Kurgan was not the only burial-mound which had attracted the attention of A.P. Melgunov, since in the wooded steppes on the west bank of the Dnieper there were many burial-mounds, which had no cover consisting of stones and which varied in height between 2.5 and 5 *sazhens* (5.3-10.6 metres) and had a diameter at their base of between 10 and 15 *sazhens* (21.3-32 metres) or more and a circumference of at least 15 *sazhens*

⁸ The region of New Serbia was formed in 1751 on the territory between the rivers Dnepr and Sinyukha and was mostly settled by the Christian Orthodox refugees from Serbia, which belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In 1764, New Serbia together with other frontier regions became a part of the Novorossiiskaya (New Russia) Province.

⁹ On Melgunov, see: Tunkina 1998, 12-26.

(32 metres) or more. A.P. Melgunov selected the one which appeared most “noble” located in the upper reaches of the rivers Bolshoi and Malyi Ingulets, near the spot known as Kucherovy Bueraki. On September 3, 1763 he gave orders for it to be excavated right down to its base, i.e. to dismantle the whole structure and go down even lower than the buried soil. It was here that the so-called Melgunov hoard was found – “a gold chain and other pieces of gold weighing one pound and forty-seven *zlotniks*, seventeen gilded doves weighing 64 *zlotniks*, various tarnished silver articles weighing three pounds and twelve *zlotniks*, forty copper spear-heads, a rusty dagger handle and one of a spear with fragments of gold”¹⁰ (Fig. 2-5).

G.F. Miller wrote of Melgunov as a man free from the prejudices or superstitions of the local people “filled with a noble spirit of curiosity, a lover of science who was aware of the benefit which may be derived from the investigation of graves”.¹¹ According to Miller the initiative for carrying out the excavations was that of Melgunov himself: he had issued to the workmen instructions with *Rules for Excavations*, promising them rewards if their digging yielded results and warning them not to conceal any finds, since their movements would be “assiduously monitored”.¹² Indeed in the files of the garrison quartermaster in the Saint Elizabeth fortress documents have survived concerning the remuneration for workmen, who had participated in the excavation of Litoi Kurgan – 70 roubles out of the “sum for Novaya Serbia”.¹³

According to the documents,¹⁴ the excavations were carried out by workmen supervised by merchants Aleksei Batrakov and Semen Vasil’ev under the overall direction of Major-General Isakov. Near the top of the burial-mound, after two feet (60cms) of black earth had been removed, an anthropomorphic female figurine made of sandstone was found or a stele with its head broken off – perhaps a Scythian one (medieval nomads’ stelae were unknown in that area).¹⁵ To the West of the centre of the burial-mound at a depth of six feet or more (more than two metres from the top of the mound), a stone cyst had

¹⁰ Institute of Manuscripts of the V.I. Vernadskii National Library of the Ukraine, the National Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine (Kiev), V. 264. Sheets 103-103 verso (copy transcribed in the 19th century).

¹¹ Miller (Müller) 1764, 498.

¹² Miller (Müller) 1764, 499.

¹³ Tunkina 1998, 21-22.

¹⁴ Murav’ev 1867, 601-602; Spitsyn 1901, 270-272; Pridik 1911, 1, 3. The main documents stored in the Institute of Manuscripts of the V.I. Vernadskii National Library of the Ukraine (National Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine) (Kiev) and the Russian State Archive of Early Acts (RGADA) were re-published on the basis of the archive originals in the following article: Tunkina 1998, 21-23.

¹⁵ Il’inskaya & Terenozhkin 1986, 67.



Fig. 2. Assemblage from Litoi Kurgan: sword handle, silver fragments, four silver 'pillars', four small silver cylinders, forty arrow-heads, twenty three nails and a small bronze rod (reproduced from Pridik 1911, pl. 1).

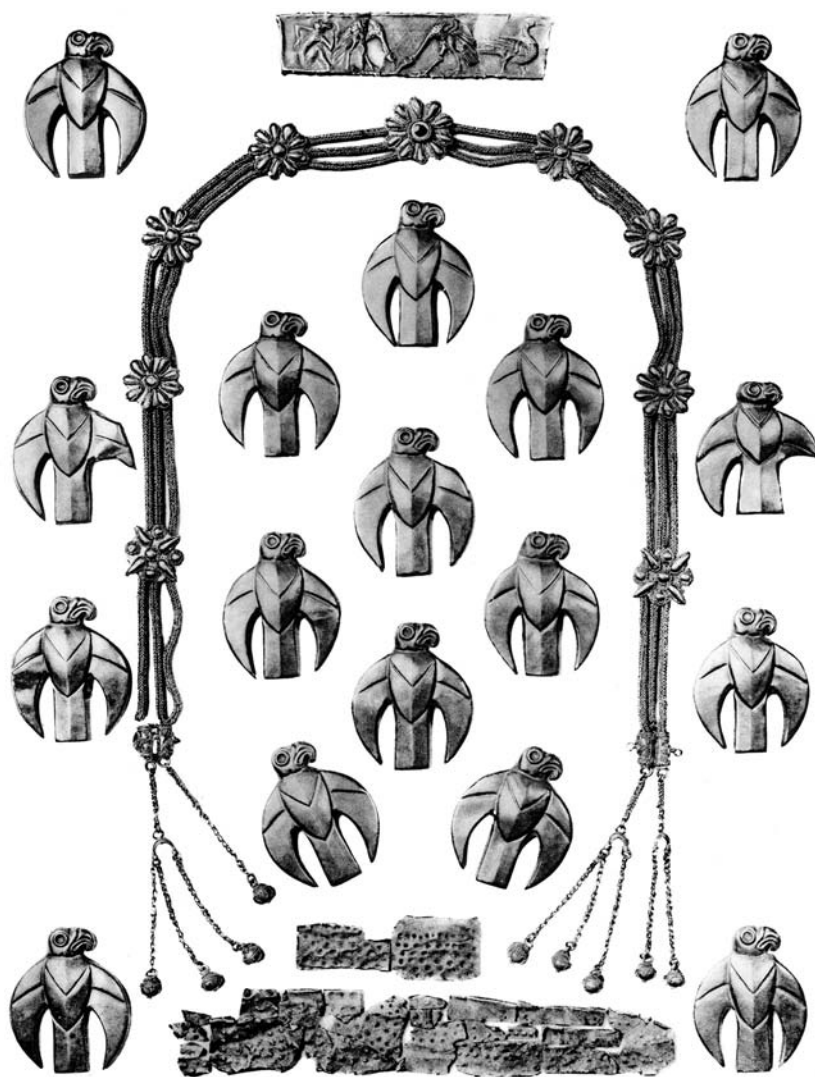


Fig. 3. Assemblage from Litoi Kurgan: diadem, gold platelet, gold fragments, seventeen birds (reproduced from Pridik 1911, pl. 2).



Fig. 4. Assemblage from Litoi Kurgan: front of a sword sheath with a protruding section at the side; lower heart-shaped part of a sword handle; gold platelet (reproduced from Pridik 1911, pl. 3).

been found according to Miller (“a place lined and covered over with stone slabs”) – a fact, moreover, which is not borne out by Melgunov’s report. In this there lay objects arranged “near to each other” (in Melgunov’s account “in close proximity one to another”), objects which have gone down in the academic literature as the Melgunov hoard.

1. An iron double-bladed akinax sword (Fig. 2), of which only the large parts of the handle faced with gold had survived in a ceremonial sheath covered in chased gold (which had only survived in part) and decorated with



Fig. 5. Assemblage from Litoi Kurgan: reverse of a sword sheath with a protruding section at the side; gold platelet (reproduced from Pridik 1911, pl. 4).

motifs typical for the Near East or Scythia in the Animal Style. G.F. Miller described them as follows: “the handle of a dagger like those you still find today used by the Persians” and “the sheath of the said dagger”¹⁶ (in the

¹⁶ Miller (Müller) 1764, 505-506.

inventory drawn up by A.P. Melgunov “an iron hilt covered with rust on which gold can be seen in places; the golden sheath for the dagger broken in three places”).

The blade of the sword had disappeared completely. This was an akinax with a straight bar-shaped terminal and a heart-shaped (butterfly-shaped) hilt. The surviving handle has an oval-shaped piece at the top covered with a stylized plant design consisting of alternating lotus flowers and buds and threads made of gold granulation (Fig. 6). Its shaft is decorated with stylized branches and the “Tree of Life” and is fixed at the bottom into a poorly preserved hilt, which bears engraved decoration in the form of two striking figures of goats lying with their bodies turned towards each other (Fig. 7). Miller interpreted various finds of pieces of iron and an iron ring as being parts of the sword’s blade, suggesting that they had served “to hold the blade in place”.¹⁷

The ceremonial sheath for the akinax (length 43.9 cms) covered with a gold facing survived much better (Fig. 2, 4-5, 8-14). At the heart-shaped opening at the top of the sheath there are two winged genii holding maces – one on each side of the “Tree of Life” (Fig. 4-5, 12). Miller described them as follows: “two winged men holding censers/maces in their hands or something similar. There is a tree in front of each of them and between them a candle-stick with five candles. There is a rose behind each of them. This is but one half... and the other has not been found”.¹⁸

On the oval bouferolle of the sheath two lions have been depicted standing in a heraldic pose (Fig. 4-5, 9). Miller mistakenly defined them as “sitting bears”.

Fastened on to the top part of the sheath was a side ledge with a round hole through it, from which the sword could be suspended and on this a recumbent deer had been depicted (Fig. 4-5, 10-11). Miller had regarded this “double plaque held in place with nails” as jewellery to be worn on apparel or used as a harness part.¹⁹ The sheath itself is decorated with a procession of mythical creatures (consisting of parts from the bodies of a man, lion, bull, ram, bird of prey, scorpion and fish). Six out of the eight figures are holding bows and arrows drawn and ready to shoot²⁰ (Fig. 4-5, 13-14). Müller suggested that the figures depicted on the sheath were a mixture of Greek fables and the craftsman’s embellishments. They resemble centaurs, but differ from them in various details”. The historian described the procession of monsters or creatures with human heads, donkeys’ ears and the heads of horses or donkeys, “feet

¹⁷ Miller (Müller) 1764, 509.

¹⁸ Miller (Müller) 1764, 507.

¹⁹ Miller (Müller) 1764, 507.

²⁰ Kisel’ 2003, 124, No. 4.

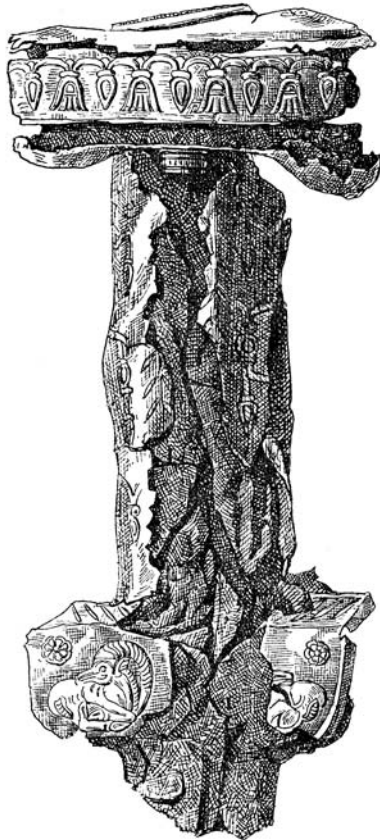


Рис. 1. Рукоять меча (н. н.).

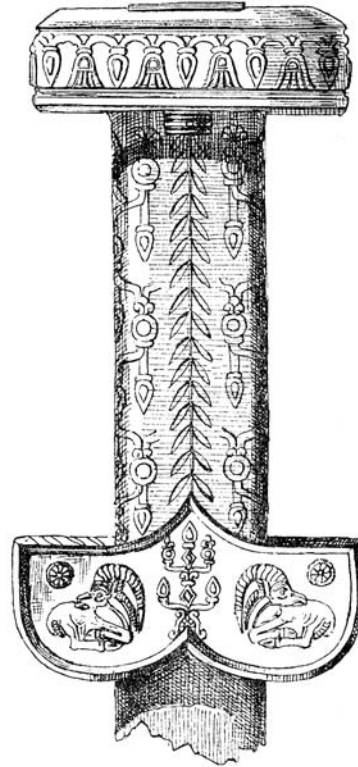


Рис. 2. Реконструкція рукояті.

Fig. 6. Sword handle and its reconstruction (reproduced from Pridik 1911, 4-6, fig. 1,2).

sometimes with hooves, sometimes with claws and occasionally with some of each, tails of two different kinds, as can be seen from the drawing. What stands out in particular is that each centaur has a large fish at his side, which are portrayed in an identical way everywhere”.²¹

In a number of studies dealing with the decoration of the Melgunov sword and the akinax similar to it, which was found in the burial-mound at Kelermes, it has been demonstrated that many motifs used for their decoration

²¹ Miller (Müller) 1764, 506.



Fig. 7. Part of a gold facing for the hilt of a sword decorated with a figure of a recumbent goat in relief and the reverse of a gold plaque in the form of a bird of prey (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. II-27845).

reveal similarities to the style of the school of art associated with the age of the Uartian king Rusa II (695/685-c. 650 BC) and it has been suggested that the craftsmen who made both the sword and the akinax had come from Urartu. Meanwhile a number of deviations from the strict rules of Uartian art could be explained by the craftsmen adapting their output to suit the requirements of their Scythian customer. This in its turn would provide confirmation for a date for the Litoi Kurgan assemblage no later than the middle or third quarter of the 7th century BC.²²

2. A gold diadem used to decorate a headdress (listed in the inventory as “one small gold chain”) and dated to the 8th or 7th century BC of Uartian or Syrian origin (Fig. 3, 5, 15-16). It consists of three plaited ropes worked in gold wire inserted through nine rosettes fashioned from gold leaf (six rosettes with 9 petals, a central one with 10 decorated with sardonyx and two star-shaped ones) and decorated with granulation. The ropes have clasps at each end, which are decorated with a geometric pattern made of granulation and to these are fastened small chains with crescent pendants and nine hollow balls made from granulation.²³ Miller regarded it as a neck-chain and was enraptured by the quality of the workmanship: it consisted “of three rows of skillfully interwoven angular links which were wrought in such a fine and pure

²² See: Metdepenningen 1997, 109-136; Ivanchik 2001, 282, Note 1. Cf. Kisel' 2003, 10, 29-30.

²³ Kisel' 2003, 50-52, 128, No. 18.



Fig. 8. Gold facing for the sheath of a sword, viewed from both sides (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. III-9011).



Fig. 9. Gold facing for the sheath of a sword: the lower section and *bouterolle* viewed from both sides (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. III-9205).



Fig. 10. Gold facing for the sheath of a sword: upper part with protruding section (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. III-9203).



Fig. 11. Gold facing for the sheath of a sword: upper part with protruding section viewed from the other side (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. III-9204).



Fig. 12. Detail of the gold facing for the sheath of a sword. Heart-shaped extension at the top with a depiction of two genii, one each side of a Tree of Life (reproduced from Artamonov 1966, pl. 2).



Fig. 13. Detail of the gold facing for the sheath of a sword. Figures of fantastic creatures (reproduced from Artamonov 1966, pl. 3).



Fig. 14. Detail of the gold facing for the sheath of a sword. Depiction in relief of a fantastic creature with a human head and arms shooting from a bow (reproduced from Artamonov 1966, fig. 3).

fashion, as if the article was of our time”. “At each end of the chain – as is duly shown in the drawing” wrote Miller, “six balls were suspended, but when I received these articles, there were only three suspended at each side and three were separate, which I then ordered to be fastened on and the extra three were added in the drawing by the painter so that they should match”.²⁴ These attempts at reconstruction were later rejected by E.M. Pridik, who was of the opinion that originally there had been 16 of the small metal balls.

3. A fragment of a gold ribbon or small plate with depictions of a seated monkey scratching its back and birds – two pecking (cranes or ostriches?) and one (goose or duck) walking along: the ends of the fragment were turned inwards and contained some holes (Fig. 3-4, 16-17). Prior to its restoration the plate had consisted of four fragments. In the opinion of V.A. Kisel’, “it had been made in some kind of production centre equally open to artistic influences from Assyria and Ionia” and probably dated from the middle or second half of the 7th century.²⁵ Miller took it for part of the gold facing of a sheath and

²⁴ Miller (Müller) 1764, 503-504.

²⁵ Kisel’ 2003, 59, 128, No. 19.



Fig. 15. Diadem consisting of three interwoven chains fastened together with nine rosettes (reproduced from Artamonov 1966, fig. 4).



Fig. 16. Details of a gold diadem showing both the front and the reverse side, a gold platelet with a depiction of a monkey and birds (Academic Archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, Neg. II-27465).



Fig. 17. Gold platelet with a depiction of a monkey and birds (reproduced from Galanina, Gratch & Piotrovski 1986, 53)

interpreted the birds as cranes.²⁶ It is possible that the plate had at one time decorated a headdress or a strap.

4. Seventeen heavy gold plates (in A.P. Melgunov's inventory listed as 17 gold doves") (Fig. 3, 5, 7, 18). These plates, fashioned in the tradition of the Scythian Animal Style, portray a bird of prey (eagle) in flight with outstretched wings and "without feet". Many of them incorporated four eyelets through which they could be fastened on to their particular base. In Miller's opinion, these metal plates had been decoration for harness.²⁷ According to M.I. Artamonov, they are more likely to have been parts of a ceremonial belt, while in the opinion of V.A. Kisel' they were decoration for a *gorytos* (quiver). Their external silhouette was almost a complete circle formed by a schematically depicted trunk with a rib in relief in the centre, the edges of the wings and the tail: all that protruded beyond the edge of the circle was the carefully executed head of the bird.²⁸

5. Silver details from furniture faced in gold, which had probably been part of a foot-stool from an Urartian palace used in conjunction with a throne dating from the early or mid-7th century BC. According to the reconstruction devised by V.A. Kisel', this was a small wooden bench 25-30cms high with four small legs, four stretchers, two elements of frame and a cover, which had probably been upholstered with leather that would have been held in place with nails.²⁹ All that has survived are the feet of the small legs – these were hollow truncated silver cones decorated with petals in relief and bands of ridges marked out with gold leaf: at the bottom the cones were closed off by a horizontal plate (Fig. 2, 19). G.F. Miller had taken them to be "candle-sticks, since it would be virtually impossible to construe any other use for these articles" and he gave orders for them to be drawn "in diverse positions". The

²⁶ Miller (Müller) 1764, 508.

²⁷ Miller (Müller) 1764, 505.

²⁸ Raevskii 1985, 30-31; Kisel' 2003, 100.

²⁹ Kisel' 2003, 61-63.



Fig. 18. Gold plaque in the form of a bird of prey (reproduced from Galanina, Gratch & Piotrovski 1986, 19).

stretchers and parts of legs consisting of hollow cylinders made of sheet silver with two stripes made up of smooth and fluted ridges with gilding belong to the same object:³⁰ also the small silver cylinders with an out-turned lower edge, which Miller took to be “extensions” of the “candle-sticks”³¹ (Melgunov’s inventory reads: “four small silver columns with gold inlays at the top, another four small silver columns and two small silver items resembling small columns”).

³⁰ Kisel’ 2003, 130, Nos. 26-27.

³¹ Miller (Müller) 1764, 505.



Fig. 19. End of the leg of a palace footstool. Silver, gold (reproduced from Galanina, Gratch & Piotrovski 1986, 41).

The details from this foot-stool also include a pair of silver nails, the flat heads of which are covered with gold leaf decorated with a chased 8-petalled rosette³² and 23 iron nails, the heads of which were decorated with a chased 8-petal rosette (referred to in the inventory as follows: “various rusty small fragments and nails of silver”) (Fig. 2).

6. Forty bronze Scythian arrowheads including bi-lobate oval and oval-rhomboid specimens, tri-lobate arrow-heads with an oval tip and a long socket, tri-lobate arrowheads with a short socket and an arched tip (listed as “41 copper spear-heads” in the inventory) (Fig. 2). The first two types are represented by specimens both with and without a knob. These arrowheads belong to the I chronological group as classified by A.I. Melyukova, i.e. they date from the 7th or 6th century BC. Miller corrected the numbers given in Melgunov’s report: one arrowhead was broken. The academician selected “for illustration” the best specimens and drew the conclusion that since the arrows were made of copper, “the use of iron had not yet been known to the people who had made this burial-mound”,³³ yet he contradicts himself, since in his own description there is mention of an iron sword, iron nails and so on found in the same burial-mound.

7. A bronze clasp from a *gorytos* (quiver) covered with a gold foil, the ends of which were fashioned in the shape of lion’s heads (Fig. 2). It is an example of Middle-Eastern workmanship, but it had been made for nomads and can confidently be dated to the 7th century BC³⁴ (in the inventory it is referred to either as “two small gold items evidently from a *sagaidak* [quiver – I.T.]” or, by E.M. Pridik, as “one small silver ingot cut in two”).

8. “A gold ring, thick and clumsily made. It is extremely large and would only be suitable for wearing on the hand by a tall and portly individual. On the outer and the inner surface it is curved: as a result it would not be possible to wear it on the finger. It weighs 6 *zolotniks* save 14 grains” wrote G.F. Miller³⁵ (in A.P. Melgunov’s inventory it is listed as follows: “thick gold ring one”). It was more likely to have been a bracelet worn on the arm and weighs almost 25.5 grammes.

After continuing their work and digging down further, the workers failed to find anything else: “neither a dead body, nor the remains of such; there was nothing of the kind to be seen. They dug down almost to the very bottom of the burial-mound before they found anything of the sort,” wrote G.F. Miller.³⁶

³² Kisel’ 2003, 130, Nos. 28-29.

³³ Miller (Müller) 1764, 508.

³⁴ Alekseev 2003, 116.

³⁵ Miller (Müller) 1764, 504-505.

³⁶ Miller (Müller) 1764, 503.

In his opinion, this testified to the fact that the funerary rite of the ancient people which had constructed this burial-mound involved cremation: “they used to dig a pit, which they would then fill with wood and other combustible material, on to which they proceeded to place the dead body. Perhaps they covered the deceased with other combustible material and then they set fire to it all and while it was burning they would build a burial-mound over the pit, which, as they opined, would serve to dispatch the deceased to the next world, so they buried him straightaway”. Miller describes “traces of a large fire”, where “molten metals, charred bones, stones, earth and clay lay mixed up with charcoal”.³⁷ This explains why the lower part of the burial-mound still above the ground level only included layers of charred earth containing clinker, ash white-grey or reddish in colour and charcoal. Several scholars believe that these were the remains of a wooden tomb above ground, which had been burnt.³⁸ In Melgunov’s report, however, there is not a word about any traces of such.

In St. Petersburg the hoard was taken to the numismatic department (Münzkabinett) of the Kunstkammer.³⁹ In his research Miller based his conclusions on Melgunov’s report and, probably, on information received from someone who had been present during the excavations and dispatched the articles to St. Petersburg – either Melgunov himself, or A. Irman – and also on his own experience acquired during the Second Kamchatka Expedition and while he was studying objects held in the Kunstkammer (at that time a catalogue of the objects in the museum was being prepared for publication at the behest of K.G. Razumskii, President of the Academy of Sciences).

G.F. Miller noted similarities between the burial-mounds of Siberia and the Northern Caucasus and he suggested that many of them had been the work of one and the same people. At the same time while he attributed the burial-mounds in Siberia and the Volga region to the Tartars, those in the South of Russia he held to be more ancient. In his article Miller virtually reproduced the report by A.P. Melgunov regarding the course of the excavations and the finds made: the report had been stored in the scholar’s “Portfolios” in the

³⁷ Miller (Müller) 1764, 503.

³⁸ Il’inskaya & Terenozhkin 1986, 67.

³⁹ The objects from the hoard were placed in the first cupboard given the No. 73: “A packet containing gold, silver and other funerary objects found in the year 1763 in the Novorossiiskaya Province and duly transmitted to the Kunstkammer from the former governor of the said province, Alexei Petrovich Melgunov via Professor Miller on the sixth day of September of the year 1764, for which an inventory has been included in the register of acquisitions” (St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Collection III, Inventory 1, Unit 150, Sheet 78 verso).

Russian State Archive of Early Acts (RGADA) in Moscow.⁴⁰ When studying the finds, the historian voiced an opinion to the effect that the burials had been those of “Ugrians or Hungarians dwelling in those lands since ancient times”, basing his premise on the similarity between the “necklace” (diadem) and the jewellery worn by the descendants of the Finno-Ugrian tribes in the 18th century, i.e. he gave the assemblage a date which was too late by at least two millennia. This can be explained by the fact that at the time concerned the artefact under investigation was something very new, the whole subject had not yet been methodically assessed, there were no chronological points of reference available and archaeology as a science was only in its infancy. In order to clarify this question once and for all Miller advocated that “more graves” should be examined in the future, i.e. that excavations should be carried out and also comparative analysis of funerary rites.

G.F. Miller surmised that the antiquities found in the burial-mound had not been manufactured by local tribes, among which he numbered the Ugrians, but by their trading partners – the “Persians”, who, in their turn, could have obtained (commodities – I.T.) through merchants from other places”. With astonishing powers of intuition the academician had sensed the eastern influence in the articles fashioned by ancient craftsmen. “Further knowledge will depend on future discoveries” wrote G.F. Miller.⁴¹ The cultural and historical roots of the Melgunov hoard were only determined a hundred years later in the second half of the 19th century and controversy regarding the date of the assemblage continues to this day.

It is known that G.F. Miller gave instructions for one of his academic illustrators to draw a number of particularly interesting (“most noble”) articles from the Melgunov hoard to be drawn “their actual size”. This task was duly carried out using natural colours and two plates were produced. At the beginning of the 20th century the originals of these drawings were found among the possessions of G.E. Kieseritzky (1847-1903), Head of the First Department of the Hermitage Museum, but later they were lost. Attempts to find them in the

⁴⁰ RGADA, Manuscript Group 199, Inventory 150, Part 5, Unit 19, Sheets 1-1 verso. In 1872 the Imperial Archaeological Commission submitted an enquiry to the Moscow Main Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as to whether Miller’s portfolios contained drawings of the ancient artefacts found in 1763: the Commission was informed that no such drawings existed but was duly sent a copy of the inventory of the artefacts and of Melgunov’s report on the excavations of the burial mound in Novaya Serbia. The report was first published in 1901: Spitsyn 1901, 270-272 (based on the copy kept in the archive of the Imperial Archaeological Commission). See: NA IIMK (Scientific Archive of the Institute of the History of Material Culture), Manuscript Group 1, Inventory 1-1872, Unit 13, Sheets 4-7. Melgunov’s report was republished by the author of this article on the basis of the original from the RGADA (Tunkina 1998, 22-23).

⁴¹ Miller (Müller), 1764, 509, 514.

archives of Saint Petersburg and Moscow have not proved successful. The contents of the two plates have been published by E.M. Pridik on the basis of a list which he found. The descriptions of the articles are Miller's. In Plate I the following articles were illustrated:

- “1) Small gold chain weighing 56 *zlotniks*;
- 2) Gold ring, weighing almost 6 *zlotniks*;
- 3) Copper plates representing a bird of prey (17 in all);
- 4 and 5) Silver candle-sticks – 4 in number, weighing 43 *zlotniks* each;
- 6) Silver extensions for the said candle-sticks – 4 in number, weighing 43 *zlotniks* each;
- 7) Similar extensions – one intact and several broken ones, weighing 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ *zlotniks*;

In Plate 2 the following articles were illustrated:

- 1) The handle of an iron dagger faced with a gold plate, most of which has fallen off;
- 2) Sheath of the above-mentioned dagger consisting of a gold plate, which had been fastened on to a wooden base making it impossible to weigh;
- 3) A double-sided gold plaque, on both sides of which there was a chased depiction of a recumbent deer: weight – 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ *zlotniks* and 10 grains;
- 4) A gold plaque, which would appear to have been part of the above sheath: weight 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ *zlotniks*;
- 5, 6 and 7) Broken gold plates, which appear to have belonged to the above-mentioned handle, but to have become detached from it: weight $\frac{3}{4}$ of a *zlotnik*;
- 8) Copper arrowheads, up to 40 in number”.⁴²

It emerges from the first letter we have published from G.F. Miller to A.P. Melgunov⁴³ that the academician had given instructions for copies to be made of the drawings and sent – together with the historian's article describing the finds – to the man who had first undertaken the excavation of the Litoi Kurgan. It is to be hoped that the copies of the drawings could have been stored among the materials belonging to A.P. Melgunov in the State Archive of the Yaroslavl Region. Miller's manuscript with the description of the treasures from the Litoi Kurgan, which was presented to Empress Catherine II, had

⁴² Pridik 1911, 3, Note 6.

⁴³ St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Group 21, Inventory 3, Unit 306/56, Sheets 1-1 verso (in French). The letter was first published in Russian 1998 (Tunkina 1998, 23-24).

probably also been illustrated with drawings (the latter might be in the Hermitage collection, in the Manuscripts Department of the Russian National Library or in the RGADA). These as yet undiscovered drawings, which formed part of the planned “The paper museum” of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences,⁴⁴ might make it possible to determine once and for all the composition of the Melgunov hoard.

It is precisely with the excavations of the Litoi Kurgan that the birth of a specific sphere within the science of archaeology is linked – namely that of Scythian studies. In 1763 a burial was discovered which related to the age of the Scythian campaigns into the Near East in the 7th century BC. The Litoi Kurgan burial-mound is one of a number of Scythian Archaic sites, which link the Dnieper region with the Northern Caucasus (apart from the burial-mound discovered by Melgunov there were also the Filatovka, Temir-Gora and Kelermes burial-mounds).⁴⁵ The artefacts in the assemblage contain two main cultural indicators from the “Scythian triad” of Scythian Archaic Culture – weaponry and the distinctive artistic style. The only detail lacking is horse harness: according to M.I. Artamonov, however, horse burials were probably not unearthed during the excavations rather than not present at all.⁴⁶

Further excavations were carried out at the Litoi Kurgan site on two further occasions: in 1894 by V.N. Yastrebov and in 1990 by N.M. Bokii. In the course of the excavations it was established that the burial-mound had been erected above an earlier Bronze-Age burial-mound which had been levelled.⁴⁷ In 1990 a ditch was found in the burial-mound which went right round the mound but which on its west side incorporated a barrier across it (width 2.2 metres). In its different parts the section, width and depth of the moat varied (the width and depth both measured as much as 3.5 metres). On the floor of the moat next to the barrier horse skulls, human bones (including a skull) were found, also a dog’s skeleton, stone artefacts, a fragment from the wall of a Bronze-Age vessel and amphora fragments”.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, no more detailed information on the excavations of 1990 is available.

In the opinion of V.A. Kisel’ Litoi Kurgan could be a temple-cum-funerary or commemorative complex linked with fire-worship or – which is more likely – a cenotaph burial-mound. This later version was supported by N.M. Bokii: “It

⁴⁴ Kistemaker, Kopaneva, Meijers & Vilinbakhov 2005.

⁴⁵ Alekseev 2003, 109, 160.

⁴⁶ Artamonov 1966, 18.

⁴⁷ Bokii 1992, 13-14.

⁴⁸ Bokii 1992, 14.

is easy to suggest that the demise of a king (or leader) had taken place during a campaign, after which his comrades-in-arms had returned to the Black Sea region and enacted a funerary ritual in his memory. The utilization of a 'ready-made' burial-mound could be justified by the fact that it was not the king himself who was buried here but merely royal attributes, but since, nevertheless, a person of high social rank was being buried, a burial-mound was still selected for the ritual ceremony, which had evidently been a very high one originally".⁴⁹ The rich grave-goods from the Litoi Kurgan site, including specimens of oriental toreutics, are comparable with those found in Scythian royal burial-mounds and could have served as valuable offerings to the gods of the Scythian pantheon.⁵⁰ This conclusion ties in with the data provided in the report by A.P. Melgunov: "Without going down as far as the ground surface round the mound, there were white layers everywhere resembling ash and burnt reddish earth containing clay. Charcoal as if laid down in a heap, numerous lumps both large and small and ingots of various dimensions and shapes. Just as there can be a whirling storm in a furnace, where iron is being made, when the diggers came down as far as the ground level round the mound and deeper still, the earth was not black, but for the most part clay was found of the same kind as found locally underneath black earth with a small amount of a different kind, which leads us to note that before burial-mounds of this kind were erected, first of all a pit was dug and then the grave would be covered over with black earth",⁵¹ Miller also writes of some charred clods of earth brought back to St. Petersburg "originating from the burnt bones of the body of the deceased, as could be recognized from their smell and their somewhat fresh colour. This is because when bones are burnt at a specific temperature, they turn blue and this colour they lose if the fire they are subjected to is hotter still... Over and above that there are a few pieces of plain reddish-brown earth, which would appear not to have been burnt".⁵²

Almost a hundred years later, at the behest of Tsar Alexander II, the Siberian antiquities from the *Kunstammer*, which had been stored together with the Melgunov hoard were exhibited for the Emperor in the Hermitage Museum on December 12, 1859.⁵³ The hoard was not, however, exhibited in its entirety:

⁴⁹ Bokii 1992, 13.

⁵⁰ Kisel' 2003, 24-27.

⁵¹ Tunkina 1998, 23.

⁵² Miller (Müller) 1764, 509.

⁵³ NA IIMK (Scientific Archive of the Institute of the History of Material Culture), Manuscript Group 1, Inventory 1-1859, Unit 4, Sheets 1-31. On the transfer of certain antiquities held in the Numismatic Department of the Academy of Sciences, 1859-1860 (it includes the

the Tsar was shown individual articles selected by Earl S.G. Stroganov, Chairman of the Imperial Archaeological Commission – only the sheath of the akinax, the diadem and four of the ‘candle-sticks’. Alexander II gave orders for the Siberian Collection from the Numismatic Department (*Münzkabinett*) of the Academy of Sciences to be incorporated into the collection of the Imperial Hermitage Museum. In exchange the Academy of Sciences was to receive an annual subsidy of 2,000 silver roubles over a period of ten years from the Cabinet of His Imperial Majesty for the publication of that which the Academy deemed useful”. The rest of the Melgunov hoard remained in the Academy of Sciences right up until the closure of the Museum of Classical Archaeology affiliated to the Academy of Sciences in 1894, when the collection was transferred to the Hermitage Museum.⁵⁴ In accordance with a decree of Tsar Alexander III “15,969 roubles of public funds was set aside “ for the Academy to recompense them for these collections “of which 2,000 was to be paid during each of the first seven years and 1,969 roubles in the eighth year”.⁵⁵

Right up until the beginning of the 20th century, when E.M. Pridik attempted to piece together the composition of this assemblage, the finds from the Melgunov hoard had been scattered in a variety of places: only three artefacts were exhibited in the Nikolskii Hall of the Hermitage Museum: the sword sheath, the diadem and the bird-shaped plates. On the basis of the brief descriptions provided by A.P. Melgunov and G.F. Miller, which, however, did not provide any information about the small items, E.M. Pridik decided that a number of these belonged (or probably belonged) to the assemblage from Litoi Kurgan. Melgunov mentions, for example, “twenty-six small broken gold items”, “various small fragments and small nails of rusted silver”, “small enamel or stone items which had turned into ingots”, while Miller wrote in general terms of a number of objects, the drawings of which “did not appear presentable”. These were “1. Various trifles in gold which weighed 11 3/4

report by L.E. Stefani [Sheets 8-14] about the antiquities in the *Kunstkammer* and the inventory of the objects in it); Manuscript Group 1, Inventory 1-1859, Unit 10, Sheets 1-34. On the presentation of antiquities for the most illustrious perusal and their transfer from the Academy of Sciences to the Hermitage Museum. 1859-1863; Manuscript Group 1, Inventory 1-1862, Unit 10, Sheets 1-11. On the transfer of drawings of Siberian antiquities from the Academy of Sciences to the Hermitage. 1862-1867; Archive of the State Hermitage Museum, Manuscript Group 1, Inventory 1-1859. Unit 53. On Siberian antiquities transferred from the Academy of Sciences to the Hermitage. 1859-1860.

⁵⁴ Pridik 1911, 3.

⁵⁵ St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Collection IV, Inventory 6, Unit 86, Sheets 2, 4.

zlotniks (more than 47 grammes – I.T.); 2. Various small pieces of silver, which appear to have been exposed to fire, which are extremely fragile, but did not melt, weighing 12 1/2 *zlotniks* and 1/8 of a *zlotnik* (53.3 grammes and 0.5 grammes); [...] 4. Two rusted copper articles gilded in places”.⁵⁶

It is worth noting that the weight of the fragments indicated by G.F. Miller is almost double that of the weight of the objects which made their way to the Hermitage Museum,⁵⁷ which either shows that various objects were mislaid from the assemblage when it was transferred from one collection to another (all that was definitely recorded was the loss of a “gold ring”, probably a bracelet), or that the antiquities were of reduced weight after dirt and oxides had been cleaned from them during restoration work in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Unfortunately, the Hermitage Museum transferred most of the artefacts from the Melgunov hoard to the Parity Commission and they then made their way to museums in what was then the capital of the Ukraine – Kharkov, where they were lost in the course of World War II.⁵⁸ Despite numerous wars and revolutions, some of the treasures from the Melgunov hoard did survive and they now add lustre to the Gold Depository in the Gallery of Treasures of the State Hermitage Museum. These are the sword in its gold sheath, the gold diadem and the gold plate with depictions of a monkey and birds on it, one silver leg, two small silver “pipes”, small silver nails and seven of the forty arrow-heads.

In the research carried out by scholars working in the 20th century, assessments of the amount of information to be gleaned from the excavations of 1763 differ wildly, but accusations of their having been undertaken in a completely unscientific way, as far as methodology was concerned predominate.⁵⁹ A.V. Artsikhovskii, on the other hand, regarded them as perfectly scientific, since “the levels were measured and described and several observations were recorded”.⁶⁰ We feel that the truth lies somewhere between these two assessments. Archaeology did not yet exist as a science in Russia in the 18th century. Scholars from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, in particular G.F. Miller, attempted, as they set out on expeditions through various provinces of the Russian state, to devise methods for field work and scholarly research and

⁵⁶ Miller (Müller) 1764, 508.

⁵⁷ Pridik 1911, 4, 16, Note 32.

⁵⁸ Artamonov 1966, 55, Note 1; Smirnova 1990, 237, Note 1; Kisel’ 2003, 125, No. 9.

⁵⁹ Artamonov 1966, 18; Melyukova 1989, 54.

⁶⁰ Artsikhovskii 1955, 526.

at the same time to interpret the antiquities they found at a level in keeping with the knowledge already attained at that time. The excavations at the Litoi Kurgan site were undertaken under the supervision of an administrator, not that of a scholar, although the existence of a report on the work carried out is in itself worthy of note. Excavations carried out in the first half of the 18th century by Siberian provincial governors were not documented at all and there are no records providing details with regard to the gold objects of the Siberian Collection of Peter the Great at all.⁶¹

Appendix

Letter from G.F. Miller to A.P. Melgunov dated May 8 (Old Style) 1764

St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Group 21, Inventory 3, Unit 306/56, Sheets 1-1 verso, draft, autograph by G.F. Miller in French⁶²

Monsieur

Je crains de facher Votre Excellence si en attendant le ponz⁶³ je diffère plus longtemps de vous présenter ma description de ces précieuses⁶⁴ antiquités sepulcrales que Vous avés eu la grace de me communiquer. Il est vrai que j'aurais fort souhaité de Vous la présenter moi même. Mais puisque cela ne se peut pas, je prie Votre Excellence de la recevoir ci jointe.

Elle sera⁶⁵ suivi bien tot⁶⁶ d'une traduction en Russe. Comme je me rapporte dans cette pièce⁶⁷ sur des desseins qu'on a fait de ces antiquités, j'ai crû devoir⁶⁸ y en⁶⁹ ajouter une copie. Les antiquités même pourront, ce semble,

⁶¹ Tunkina 2002, 36-37. See, also: Tunkina 2003, 303-364.

⁶² The French text is prepared for publication by N.L. Sukhachev, Institute of Linguistic Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

⁶³ This word is probably a variant of *ponce* – 'tracing, copy'.

⁶⁴ In the original *des* was changed to *de* and the words *ces précieuses* were written in over the top.

⁶⁵ This was written over the crossed out words *Je la ferai*.

⁶⁶ After this was the word *par* which had been crossed out.

⁶⁷ This word was written in the left margin between two lines to replace *description*.

⁶⁸ This word was followed by *les* which had been crossed out.

⁶⁹ This word had been written in above the line.

être remises le⁷⁰ plus commodement à la personne qui me les a apportées, ou à telle⁷¹ autre qu'il plaira à votre Excellence de m'envoyer.

J'ai l'honneur d'être avec infiniment de respêt

Monsieur
de Votre Excellence

ce 8 Mai
1764

le tres humble et tres
obeissant serviteur
Müller

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⁷⁰ This word had been inserted from above the line.

⁷¹ This word had been written in over *quelque* which had been crossed out.

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