

A Unique Dagger from the Koban Necropolis, North Caucasus¹

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Fig 1. Dagger with moufflons

INTRODUCTION

One hundred and thirty-three years ago, the French specialist Ernest Chantre excavated a cemetery in the Caucasus, on the modern territory of the Republic of North Ossetian republic, in Koban village. At this site he unearthed hitherto unknown and finely crafted bronzes that created international interest in the archaeology of the Caucasus. Since these investigations, there have been done many discoveries that have further enriched the archeology of the Caucasus. However, among specialists, the Koban material remained one of the key components in the system of those discoveries. The Koban necropolis owes its distinctiveness to a wide variety of bronze objects, which show a high standard of craftsmanship and artistry. In the manner of Hallstatt, Koban turned out to be the emblematic site for significant Late Bronze–Early Iron Age material culture for the north Caucasus region, which today is part of the Russian Federation.

In 1881, French archaeologist Ernest Chantre conducted archaeological excavations at Koban necropolis, where he brought to light 22 tombs and as he states only ten of these were in a good enough condition of preservation to study their structure

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and funeral inventory. The result of the excavations surpassed Chantre's expectations, as he had uncovered a large number of very interesting objects. He also unearthed several undamaged skeletons, which he had been eager to find for his anthropological studies. Later he would characterize the Koban necropolis as the most remarkable discovery in the Caucasus : "La plus remarquable qui ait été découverte au Caucase" (Chantre 1883 :12). The number of bronze objects unearthed during the excavation was 187. Among the artefacts he collected was a unique bronze dagger that stands out from the rest of the collection.

The dagger discussed in this article is probably the most representative object among Chantre's Koban collection. This dagger reflects all the features of the Koban culture. It does not find any parallels outside of the Koban necropolis (Tab.103). This daggers has T-shaped handle with three figurines of the moufflon head attached on the pommel (Fig.143). Those moufflon heads are typical for the Koban culture and we will speak about them in detail below. We should note that similar attachments of animal figurine on the dagger are not so typical in the Caucasus region. Other examples come only from Koban necropolis itself, where figures of the moufflon are attached on the pommel (Fig.144). This dagger is part of the Olshevski's collection. The idea of depicting an animal figurine on top of the weapon comes from the Colchis, where we often have animal sculptures attached on the butt of a dagger (see for example Koridze 1965:tab. XXXVIII). Among the Koban collection there is a bronze fibula that has exactly the same three moufflon heads attached. We attributed this fibula to the 9th–7th centuries BC. Here it is interesting to note that Chantre, describing both this dagger and the fibula, mentions that Karnukhoff (who gave him the materials from Koban necropolis) told him that the dagger and the fibula, as well as a pin with the image of stag and dogs, were from the same grave (Chantre 1886:69). Chronologically it makes sense, but except for this short information we don't have any safe substance to consider those objects as part of one funeral assemblage.



Fig 2. Dagger with Figures of the moufflon attached on the pommel (Hermitage Museum)

The second dagger belonging to this type has more rounded pommel with ends that go in upward direction. We should still consider it as part of a dagger with T-shape pommel. This dagger also has an inverted V-shaped handle base and narrow prominent midrib on the blade. We do not have any analogous dagger outside of Koban necropolis. The only exact example can be found in Uvarova's collection that is also part of the Koban necropolis (Uvarova 1900:X). The dagger under discussion is part of the Koban assemblage 14 and as we have discussed above, we ascribe this assemblage to the beginning of the first millennium BC.

Omega shaped hilt base is an indicator of early period daggers. On the contrary Koban daggers that have inverted V-shaped handle base, as we can see based on above described two daggers, should be considered of later period. To support this argument we have a

miniature bone dagger found in the Koban tomb no. 9, which also has inverted V-shaped hilt base. As we know, the absolute date of this assemblage is 10th-9th century BC.

Our Koban dagger under discussion has the so-called flame-shaped blade with pronounced flat rectangular midrib. It is one of the characteristic objects of Koban necropolis and generally of Koban culture. It appears in both the southern and the northern parts of the Caucasus region. Kozenkova examining those daggers in south Caucasus refers to them as to "Koban" type dagger (Kozenkova 2002:85). At Chantre's Koban collection we have six dagger blades of this type (Tab.94,3; 95,1-3; Fig.134). Their length varies from 23.0 to 31.0 cm. Among them, four sub-types can be distinguished.

i) The first is a dagger blade with prominent flat rectangular midrib, large sloping angular shoulder, triangular tang with two rivet holes on the base. We have two dagger blades of this type (Tab.94,3; 95,1). One of these daggers has longer tang at the end that is rounded in-section.

ii) The second sub-type is the dagger blade with the same type of midrib as previous one, large rounded shoulder and a rivet hole on the top of the triangular tang. This variation is represented by a single piece (Tab.95,2).

iii) The third type is the dagger blade with triangular tang, sloping shoulders with rivet holes on both sides. The midrib is prominently flanked by lines in relief. This variation is also represented by a single piece (Tab.95,3). In the northern Caucasus these types of daggers appear from the

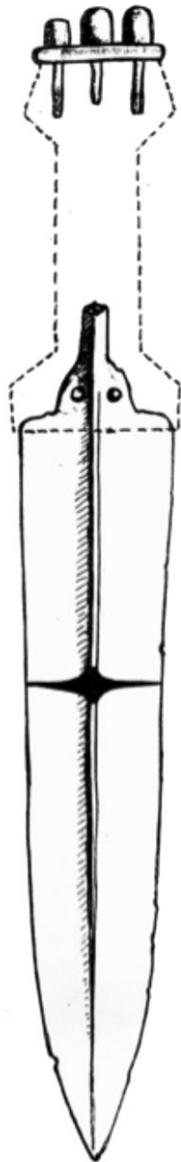


Fig 3. Handle reconstruction of a dagger from Tli cemetery

northern part of the region such as Kamenomorskoe and Malgobek to the eastern regions such as Bashi yurt and Senjen-yurt (Reinhold 2007:32-34). However, it should be noted that not all daggers from these sites resemble our Koban daggers exactly. Most of them do not have such dominant waist and triangular tang as the Koban daggers. Reinhold notes that in the western part of the Koban culture different variation of the flame-shaped dagger was developed (Reinhold 2007:32-33). The daggers from Sharoi and Senjen-yurt grave no. 57 can be considered the exact analogue to the Koban dagger blades under discussion. Kozenkova marks them as type I, variation 2 and based on Tekhov's chronology of similar daggers from Tli cemetery, assigns Senjen-yurt dagger blade from the merge of 11th -10th centuries to the beginning of 9th century BC (Kozenkova 1982:21,22).

In south Caucasus, exact analogues of those daggers are mainly found at Tli cemetery. A large spectrum of the dagger type under discussion is presented at this site. Tekhov proposes the reconstruction of the form of the handle of the flame-shaped dagger based on the bronze fragment found together with the dagger at Tli grave no. 126 (Fig.132). It has a T-shaped pommel and an inverted V-shaped lower part of the handle where it is attached to the blade (Tekhov 1980:tab.74). The author of the excavation of Tli cemetery placed flame-shaped daggers in type IV and dated them to the 13th -10th centuries BC (Tekhov 1977:92). Apakidze gives different date to these Tli daggers. He assigns most part of the flame-shaped daggers to the 10th-9th centuries BC (Apakidze 2002: 138-143). Yet another dating of Tli flame-shaped

dagger is proposed by Nino Sulava. Examining fibulas from Tli cemetery, Georgian specialist dated funeral assemblages containing flame-shaped dagger to the 8th-7th centuries BC (Sulava 2011:68). In the south Caucasus, flame-shaped daggers are also attested at Stirfaz cromlech no. 11, grave no. 5 (Tekhov 1979:67-77), Abano village in Kareli district (Ramishvili 1998:tab.XIV), Brili in the Racha region (Gobejishvili 1952:99,tab.LXI), and Rene in Shida Kartli region (Iremashvili 1976:33). The authors of excavations of those sites generally date them to the 11th - 8th centuries BC.

Speaking about Koban flame-shaped daggers, we should outline one certain group of the daggers in the southern Caucasus. Although those daggers are somewhat different from Koban ones, archaeologists still call them flame-shaped daggers

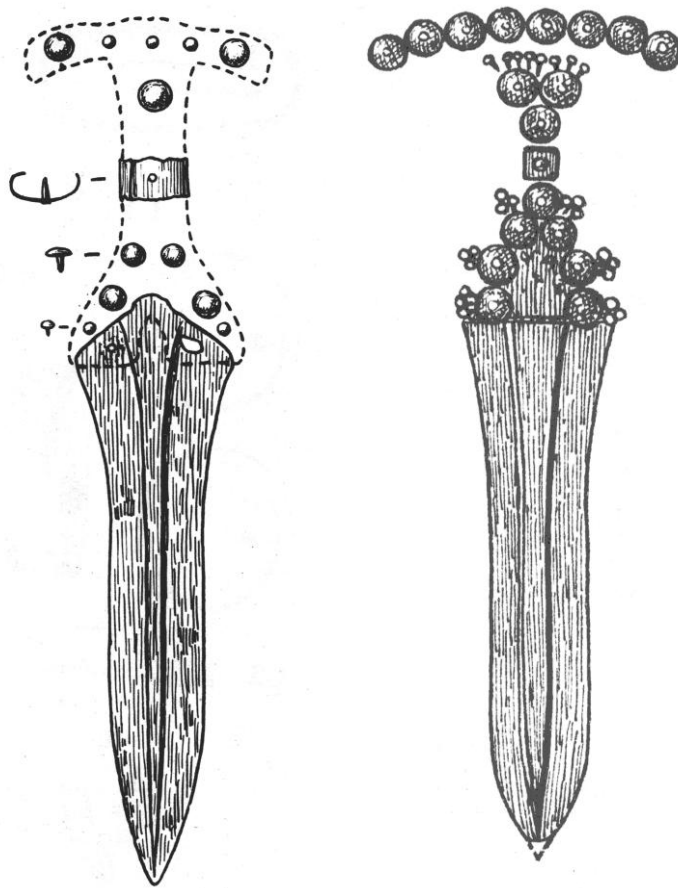


Fig 4. Handle reconstructions of “flame” shape daggers. Tli grave no.126 and Stirfaz grave no.5. After Tekhov 1977

The upper part of those daggers is similar to Koban ones. They also have similar large flat rectangular midrib. However, those southern Caucasian daggers are much shorter in length and do not have similar dominated waist as we have at Koban (Fig.133). Those southern Caucasian daggers are found at Chalipiragorebi in Tbilisi (Miron and Orthmann 1995:323), Bornigele grave no. 108 (Gambashidze and Gambashidze 1995:48-54), Kobala grave no. 13 (Tushishvili 1982:55), Samtavro grave no. 281 (Kalandze 1980:139), Beshtasheni grave no. 4 (Akhvlediani and Sultanishvili 2010:126-129), Tli grave no. 27, and Stirfaz cromlech no. 2, 7 and 9 (Tekhov 1980:tab31; 1974:8,10-11).

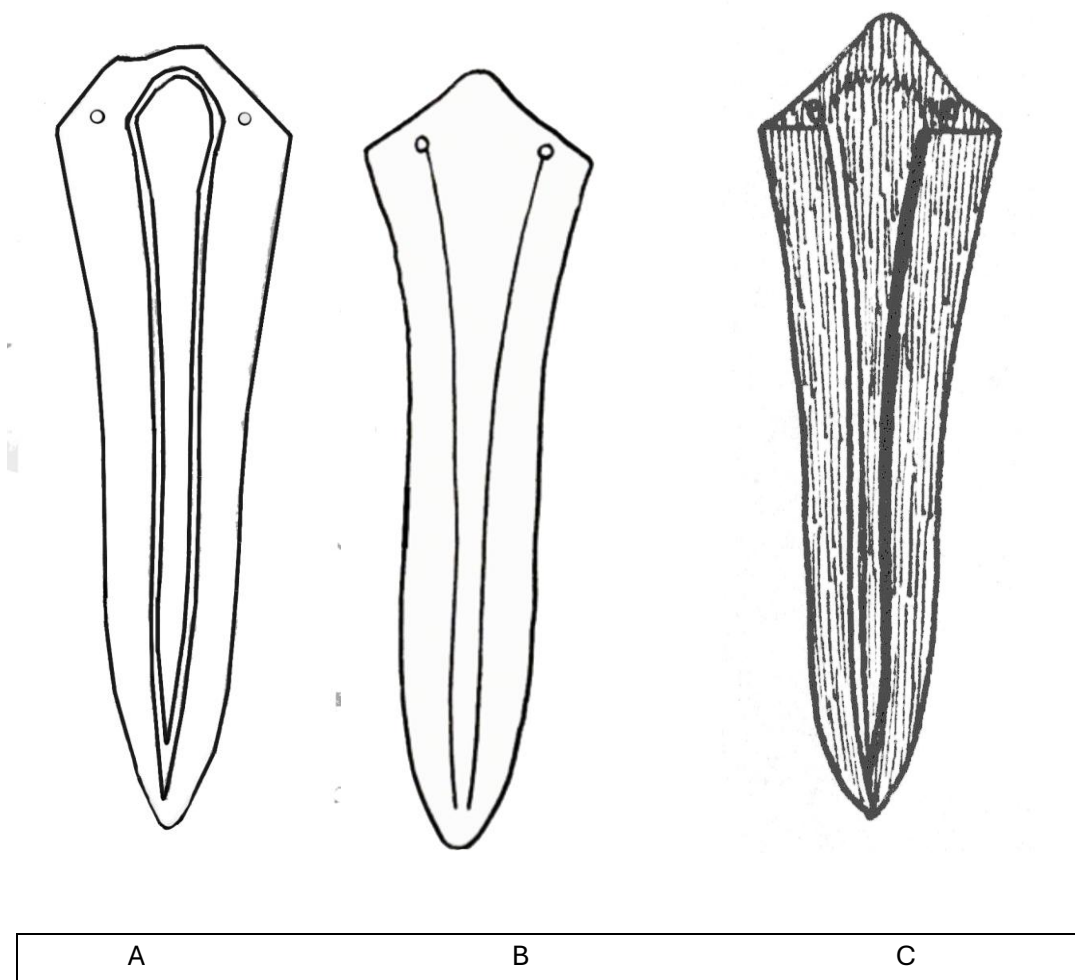


Fig 5. So Called short „flame“ shaped daggers

A) Samtavro grave no.281 B) Koban tomb no.13 C) Stirfaz cromlech no.2

This type of dagger can also be found in the northern Caucasus at Verkhnyaya Rutkha (Motzenbäcker 1996: 70,71). The earliest among these daggers is considered from Paluri in the Gali region in western Georgia. It has primitive form without midrib and is dated to the 15th -14th centuries BC (Akhvlediani and Sultanishvili 2010:126-129). One of the later versions of this dagger can be considered from Stirfaz cromlech no. 11, grave no. 5, where it co-exists together with the flame-shaped dagger similar to Koban (Fig.135). The ceramic materials such as open bowls and jars with zoomorphic handles and fingernailed ornamentation along the shoulder found together with those daggers give substance to date this Stirfaz assemblage from the merge of the second and first millennia to the beginning of the first millennium BC. Most likely we can consider these shorter flame-shaped daggers as a prototype of the longer ones. The process of evolution of this dagger is evident in the south Caucasus as well as in the north Caucasus, where we have seen the short flame-shaped dagger at Verkhnyaya Rutkha. It should be noted that at Samtavro grave no. 267 dated to the 13th century BC, we already have later version of the flame-shaped dagger that has a distinct waist similar to those from our Koban collection (Kalandadze 1980:114). However, at Koban necropolis the later version of the flamed-shaped dagger appears much later than Samtavro. Probably at the same time as it appears at Stirfaz cromlech no. 11.

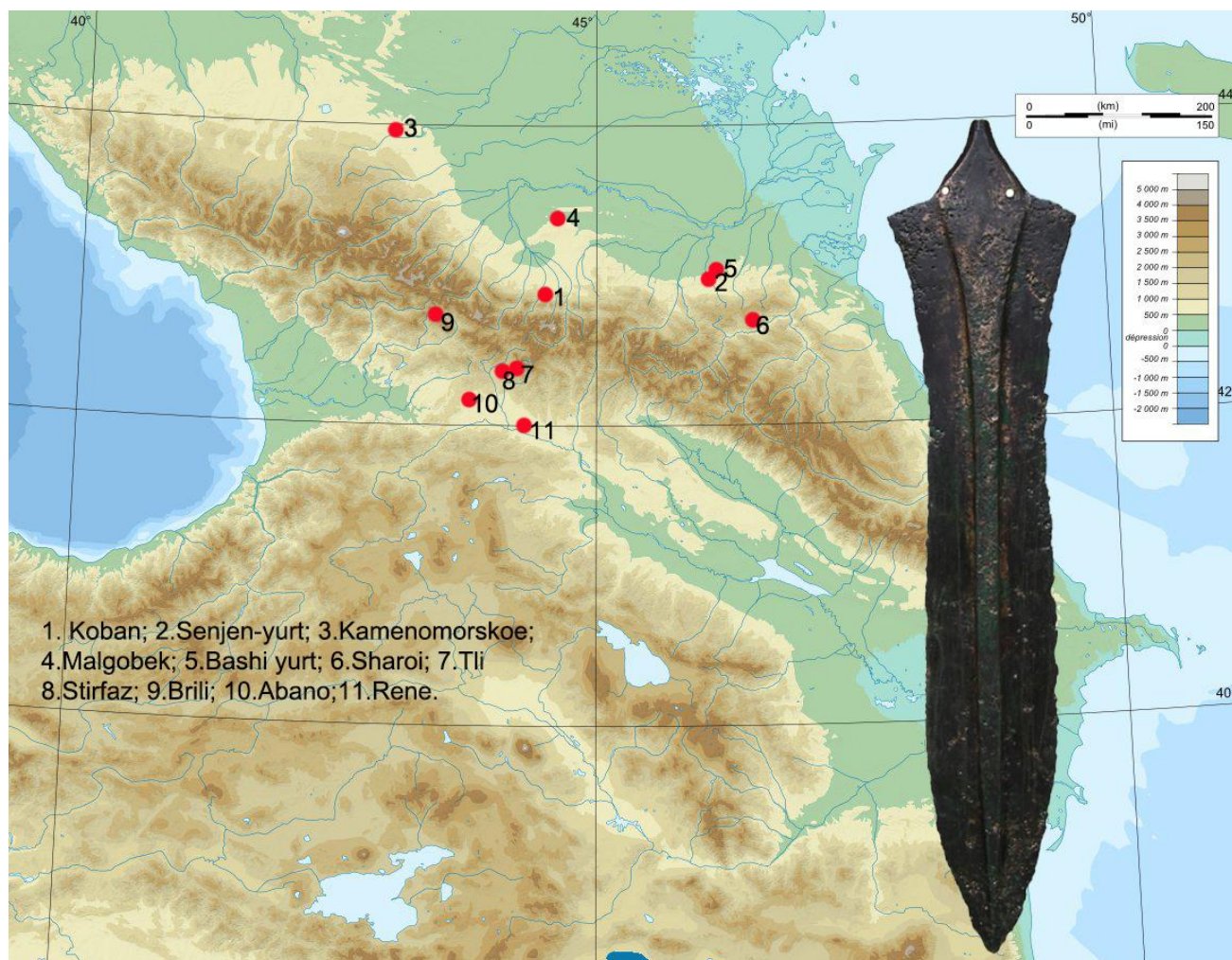


Fig 6.. Distribution of dagger type 1 in the Caucasus region.

Among Chantre's Koban collection of flame-shaped daggers, it is difficult to speak about chronological sequence based on the features that we have distinguished. The daggers with a shorter tang, that show resemblance to the earlier flame-shaped version, are most probably of earlier period than those with longer tang. One of such dagger at Tli cemetery grave no. 17 appears together with a pot that has ribbed body and so-called "zoomorphic" handle of Colchian type. Similar type vessel is attested in Ergeta grave no. 9 dated to the ninth-eighth centuries B. C. (Papuashvili 1998).

CONCLUSION

At Koban necropolis called leaf-like dagger is one of the characteristic elements for the Samtavro culture in Shida Karti region. And it also appears at Colchian sites in western Georgia (for the distribution and chronology of "leaf" like dagger see Akhvlediani 2010:126-139). Similarly, in

terms of interaction, interesting type of bronze dagger is so called “flamed shaped” dagger that as we know at Koban necropolis is widely represented

Based on abovementioned evidence, we can say that daggers with a T-shape pommel in the Caucasus region start appearing at the beginning of the first millennium BC. and they became one of the characteristic features for the Koban necropolis.

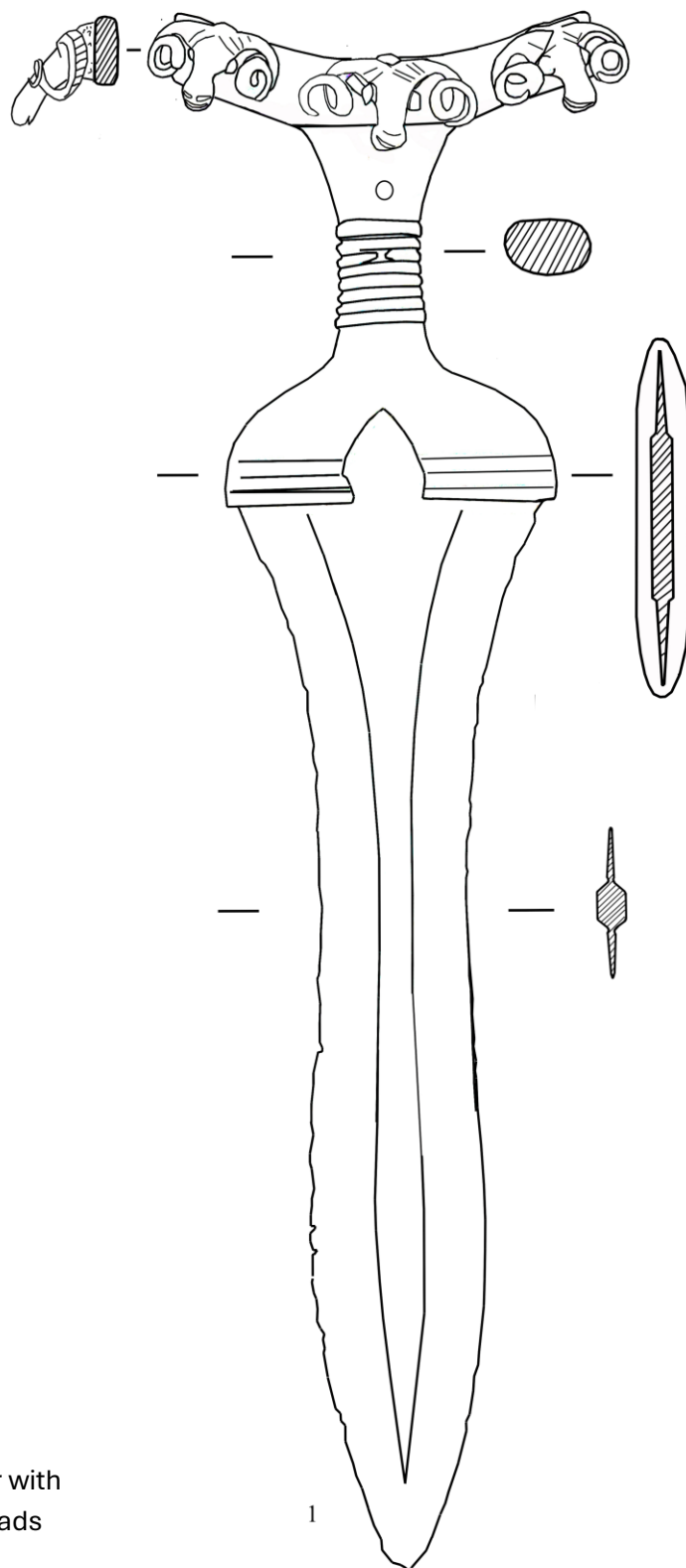


Fig.7 Dagger with
moufflon heads



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