

# Two Waves of Sarmatian Migrations in the Black Sea Steppes during the Pre-Roman Period

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In the late 1960s, A.N. Ščeglov proposed a new periodization of the history of the north-western Crimea during Classical and Hellenistic times, and drew the important conclusion that the Sarmatians moved into the northern Black Sea region as early as the end of the 4th century BC.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, D.A. Mačinskij on the basis of his analysis of the literary sources came to the conclusion that the Sarmatians had become the dominant power throughout the lands between the Don and Dnieper rivers as early as 310 BC.<sup>2</sup>

This discussion about the dating of the Sarmatian advance into the northern Black Sea area has continued into our own times, and a fairly large volume of evidence has been accumulated. Claiming no final solution to the problem, I would like nevertheless to make an attempt at putting forward a hypothesis about the fluctuating character (most probably involving two extensive waves of migrations) of the history of the Sarmatians during the period from the end of the 4th to the 2nd century BC in the steppe regions contiguous with the northern coasts of the Black Sea.

The studies of the early history of the Sarmatians are complicated by the lack of any consistent information in the works of the various ancient authors on the ethno-political history of the region in question during the period from the downfall of Greater Scythia up to the reign of Mithridates VI Eupator. For two centuries, the northern Black Sea region fell outside the scope of the ancient historians and geographers.<sup>3</sup> A highly significant point is, to my opinion, that the famous historian Polybios regarded as “fairy tales” all the stories of his contemporaries about these lands (Polyb. 3.38.2-3), and Strabon relates that this world was discovered for Greece only by Mithridates and his generals (Strab. 1.2.1). I believe that the latter statement is very important in many respects, in particular for dating the ethno-political map of the northern Black Sea area drawn for us by that ancient geographer, but this will be discussed below.

Among the various written traditions about the appearance of the Sarmatians in the northern Black Sea region, that of Diodoros Siculos seems to be of considerable importance. He states (Diod. 2.43.7) that the

Sauromatians (i.e. Sarmatians) “devastated a considerable part of Scythia and, exterminating all the conquered to a man, reduced most of the country to a desert”. The opponents of the theory of an early date for the Sarmatian invasion of the northern Black Sea area regard this passage as semi-legendary, and insist that there is no absolutely reliable evidence in the written sources for the presence of the Sarmatians in this region until the 2nd century BC.<sup>4</sup> However, such evidence does exist. Ju.G. Vinogradov in his analysis of the well-known Chersonesean decree *IOSPE I*<sup>2</sup>, 343 pointed out that l. 15 of this inscription deals precisely with Sarmatians who were preparing their invasion of the West. Ju.G. Vinogradov was inclined to date the decree to the first quarter of the 3rd century BC, although he did not rule out a wider chronological limit even to the middle of the 3rd century BC.<sup>5</sup> On the basis of the evidence from this inscription, it may be concluded that the Sarmatians attacked the northern Black Sea area at this time and possibly not for the first time.<sup>6</sup> It is probably with these raids that the aforementioned statement of Diodoros about the devastation of Scythia should be connected (Diod. 2.43.7).

Scythia was practically reduced to a wilderness then – the steppe areas of the northern Black Sea region were abandoned for a long time, and are almost completely devoid of archaeological sites dated to before the 2nd century BC. One must acknowledge, however, that notwithstanding their victorious raids, the Sarmatians did not occupy these lands in the 3rd century BC, since the encampments of these nomads are distributed throughout the regions of the Don and Kuban rivers during this period.<sup>7</sup>

But then, who were the nomadic tribes who actually made the westward advance? From the text of the decree *IOSPE I*<sup>2</sup>, 343 it follows that they were the Sarmatians. However in this case it is of the greatest importance to know whether this term should be used collectively to designate the Iranian-speaking nomads of the post-Scythian epoch in general as it came to be used in the later ancient tradition and in modern science, or are we dealing with the name of only one nomadic tribe, or, rather, a group of tribes that advanced westwards and took a very active part in the events related to the break-up of Greater Scythia. The supposition that this was a group of tribes seems to be the most probable,<sup>8</sup> since we know that distinguished amidst the Sarmatian communities were certain “Royal” Sarmatians (Strab. 7.3.17; App. *Mithr.* 69). In the opinion of T. Sulimirski,<sup>9</sup> the latter played an important role in the devastation of Scythia, and for that reason they took the place of the former “Royal” Scythians in the system of the intertribal links in the region (Hdt. 4.20).

In the decree in honour of Protogenes (*IOSPE I*<sup>2</sup>, 32), which possibly dates from the 220s-210s BC<sup>10</sup> we learn about the tribe of the Saioi, whom many researchers identify as the “Royal” Sarmatians.<sup>11</sup> Quite possibly, the Saioi were based in encampments situated along the Don from where it was fair-

ly easy to raid various cities of the northern Black Sea area including Olbia, and even further to the west.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, it is possible that this specific group of tribes, or the first wave of Sarmatian migrations to the west, should be called the Sarmatians proper, while this appellation was only transferred to the other groups later. Notwithstanding the scarcity of information available to us, there are reasons to suppose that the first wave of the Sarmatian migrations included the Sirakoi, who fairly early moved into the Kuban region and in 310/9 BC took part in the internal struggle between the sons of the Bosporan King Pairisades I. Various sinuosities of that struggle are marvellously recounted by Diodoros (Diod. 20.22-24). As far back as 1895 it was suggested that it was actually the Sirakoi who were the allies of Eumelos (one of the pretenders to the throne) and who are called the "Thracians" in the text.<sup>13</sup> The Sarmatian tribe of the Sirakoi certainly may have had considerable armed forces at their disposal.<sup>14</sup> Strabon states that in the times of Pharnakes, the Sirakoi could, if necessary, immediately put 20,000 horsemen in the field (Strab. 11.5.8). No wonder that the hypothesis mentioned above finds many supporters.<sup>15</sup>

The description of the Sirakoi left by Strabon in the context of the Bosporan history after Mithridates (Strab. 11.5.8) leads some researchers to think that this tribe appeared in the Kuban region fairly late, perhaps in the second third of the 2nd century BC.<sup>16</sup> However, this suggestion seems highly unlikely.

In this context, the chronological aspect of the ethno-political situation described by Strabon is of prime importance. The problem with the sources he used, in particular the sources for book VII dealing with the northern Black Sea area, is highly complicated.<sup>17</sup> First of all, one should consider carefully the aforementioned statement by Strabon that the lands between Tyras and the Caucasus were discovered only by Mithridates Eupator and his generals (Strab. 1.2.1). Also revealing is Strabon's opinion that among all other authors the most trustworthy are the historians of the Mithridatic Wars (Strab. 11.2.14).

Hence, the opinion of those scholars who believe that Strabon's description concerns the last decade of the 2nd century BC<sup>18</sup>, the very end of the 2nd century BC<sup>19</sup>, or the late 2nd – early 1st century BC is that his account seems to be credible.<sup>20</sup>

Probably, the settling of the different tribes as presented by Strabon had in the main taken place by the end of the 2nd century BC, although the account was perhaps subjected to certain changes later, since Strabon may have been supplementing and correcting it right up till his death.<sup>21</sup> However, it is unlikely that those corrections would have been of critical importance.

The acknowledgement of this fact is, in my opinion, of considerable significance for the reconstruction of the history of Sarmatian migrations in the

steppes of the northern Black Sea area. The point is that the peculiarities of the economic system, which according to Strabon (11.2.1) were characteristic of the Sirakoi and certain other tribes, are quite untypical for any nomads who had appeared there not long before: some of them moved together with their herds while others were arable farmers, which was typical of those peoples who had entered the period of crisis of the nomadic economy.<sup>22</sup>

Of great importance in this context is the periodization of the historical cycles of the development of nomadic communities in the northern Black Sea area proposed by S.A. Pletneva on the basis of the ideas suggested by S.I. Rudenko.<sup>23</sup> Pletneva distinguishes the following three major stages:

The first period – the period of the invasion when the nomads having advanced from the East were conquering their “new motherland” and wandered without observing definite routes and having no fixed areas of summer and winter pasture. This period, which lasted approximately 50 years in the history of the nomads, has yielded almost no archaeological record. It is strange that in Strabon’s description none of the nomadic peoples fit such a description.

The second stage, is characterized by the nomads having already established stable routes of migration, areas of the summer and winter pastures, and tribal cemeteries. In the *Geography* of Strabon, we find at this stage the Roxolanoi who used to winter on the pastures near the Sea of Azov and move to the north to spend the summers (Strab. 7.3.17). The ancient geographer designates as nomads most of the other tribes from the northern Black Sea region (Strab. 7.3.17), whom J. Harmatta, with nothing to support this view, considers semi-nomads.<sup>24</sup>

The third stage is that of a crisis when some of the impoverished nomads had to settle and adopt agriculture, while other richer families continued their nomadic movements. This stage constitutes a relatively long time-span (certainly more than one century) in the history of the nomads following their invasion of the northern Black Sea area. It is noteworthy that the Scythians started practising agriculture only in the 4th century BC.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, if by the end of the 2nd century BC the Sirakoi, as they were recorded by Strabon, had already entered the crisis of the nomadic economy then they must have appeared in the Kuban region not later than the 3rd century BC – most probably at the end of the 4th century BC. It is curious though, that the same may be supposed about the Aorsoi who lived to the north of the Sirakoi, occupying the vast steppe areas stretching from the River Don to the Caspian Sea. Their life and economy described by Strabon were very similar to that of the Sirakoi – the Aorsoi also practised nomadic stock-rearing along with arable farming (Strab. 11.2.1). In other words, they cannot be considered as newcomers in the region though this fact is rarely acknowledged in archaeological literature.<sup>26</sup> Most scholars assume that the Aorsoi advanced westwards relatively late.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting that Strabon always

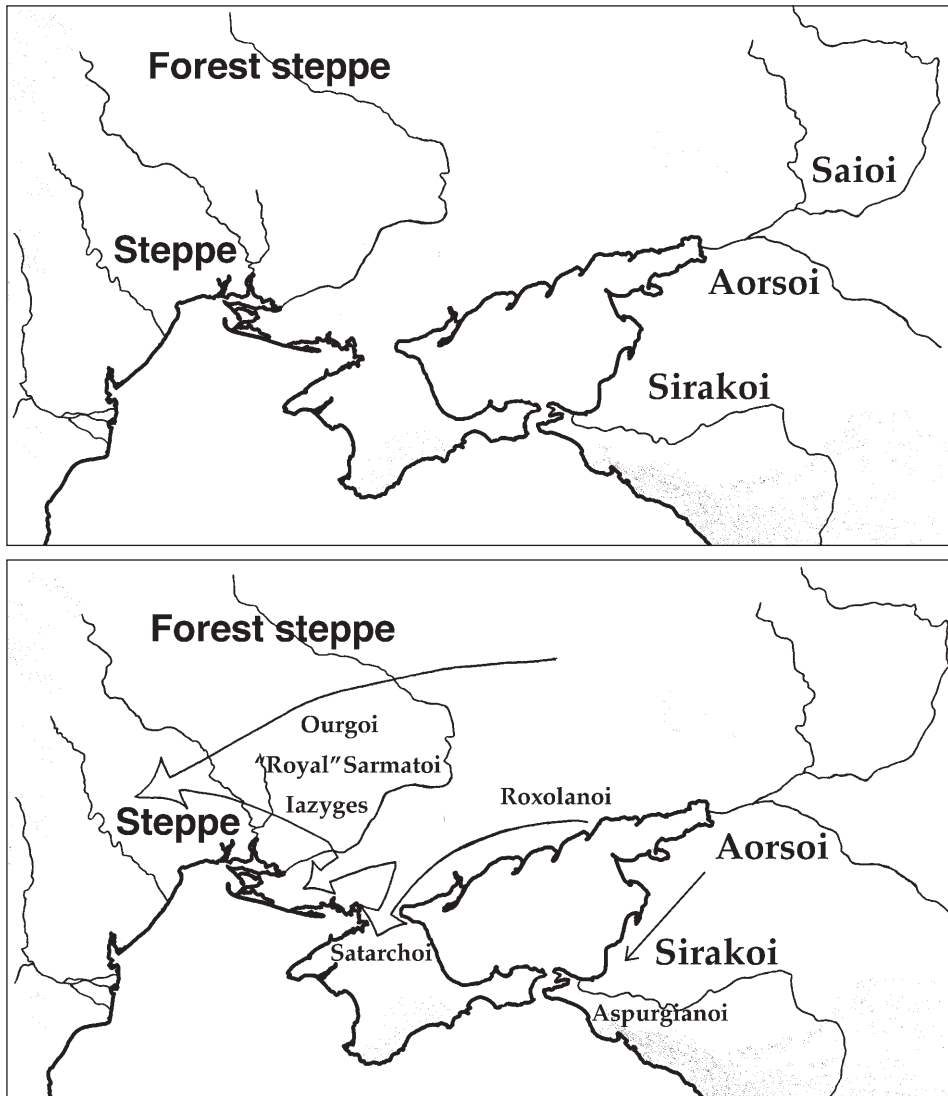


Fig. 1-2. The two waves of Sarmatian migrations. The first (top) in the end of the 4th century BC. The second (bottom) in the middle of the 2nd century BC.

mentions the Sirakoi and Aorsoi together, and in general there are reasons to suppose that these “permanent enemies” in the words of V.B. Vinogradov,<sup>28</sup> appeared in this region simultaneously.

It is known that the Aorsoi held a special position in the regional system of those international trade links reaching as far as India and Babylon. According to Strabon, the so-called “Upper” Aorsoi actively participated in this trade (Strab. 11.5.8). It hardly makes any sense to discuss here whether the “Upper” Aorsoi were occupied exclusively with escorting different car-

avans,<sup>29</sup> as was highly typical of nomads,<sup>30</sup> or whether their role in trade was of a more significant nature.<sup>31</sup> It should be stressed, however, that the formation of this trade route could scarcely have been an instantaneous event.

Here we will attempt to answer the question as to when this trade route may have appeared – or rather what archaeological evidence may indicate when it was functioning. Obviously, in the first place such evidence includes coin finds: eastern coins found in the northern Black Sea area and from various Greek states situated on the northern coasts of the Black Sea deposited in the East. Such finds may indicate that the trade caravans indeed covered long distances in the early centuries of our era. But we have grounds to discuss even earlier periods, too.

In my opinion, it is evident that the “Upper” Aorsoi actually brought caravans to the Greek cities which were closest to the areas of migration, i.e. the cities of the Bosporan Kingdom. Hence it is important to know when Bosporan coins first appeared in the East. It should be mentioned at once that the early finds in that area are extremely rare, but then so are the later ones.

Thus a coin of Phanagoria from 250-200 BC was found in Chorasamia.<sup>32</sup> A hoard of Bosporan coins was found even further to the east (*IGCH* 1821). For some unknown reason this hoard has been almost disregarded by scholars, although the authenticity of the find seems to be fairly indisputable.<sup>33</sup> This hoard consisted of 16 Bosporan coins of which 15 were from Pantikapaion and one from Phanagoria. The latest examples date from the 2nd century BC.

A significant point is that the earliest eastern coins, in particular Parthian and Graeco-Bactrian ones, found in the northern Black Sea region are dated to the 2nd century BC.<sup>34</sup> All the coin finds mentioned above suggest, in my opinion, that the formation of the system of international trade in which different cities of Bosporos and, in one way or the another, the nomadic societies of the region were involved, began in the second half of the 3rd or first half of the 2nd century BC. There are reasons to believe that this was a period when the northern Black Sea region enjoyed a degree of stability between the two waves of Sarmatian incursions.<sup>35</sup>

That relatively trouble-free epoch ended, apparently, about the middle of the 2nd century BC with the invasion of new nomadic tribes. This second wave of the Sarmatian migration now reached the Dnieper. According to Strabon's text, this wave can be linked with the Roxolanoi, Iazyges, and possibly the Ourgoi. Probably it also involved the “Royal” Sarmatians, who as mentioned above may have been living in the steppes of the Don region and who were recorded by Strabon as occupying the right bank of the Dnieper. Another group who must have been related to this wave were the Satarchoi. Pliny relates that these crossed the Don (*Plin. HN* 6.22), and one inscription mentions their presence in the Crimea in the second half of the 2nd century

BC (*IOSPE I*, 672). Ju.M. Desjatčikov linked the appearance of the Satarchoi with the nomads from Central Asia, who were settling widely throughout the West and overwhelmed the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom.<sup>36</sup>

At this point, the Aorsoi and the Sirakoi were probably not displaced from their territories, although D.A. Mačinskij, on the basis of some relatively late sources (Plin. *HN* 4.80; Ptol. 3.5.7-10), suggested that the Aorsoi (or better perhaps, some of them) were carried along with the movement toward the West.<sup>37</sup> Serious changes in the position of these two tribes seem to have been caused by the appearance of the Aspurgianoï in the Asiatic part of Bosporos (Strab. 11.2.11). Their advance here is usually dated to the last quarter of the 2nd century BC<sup>38</sup>, and later the Aspurgianoï assumed a very important role in the events of Bosporan history.<sup>39</sup>

The acute crisis, which affected various Greek cities in the northern Black Sea region as a result of such significant changes in the world of the neighbouring barbarians and the general destabilisation of the situation in this region, finally compelled the Greeks to look to the Pontic king Mithridates VI for rescue.

## Notes

1. Ščeglov 1968, 336-337, map 3.
2. Mačinskij 1971, 46, 51.
3. See Rostowzew 1931, 105 ff.; Mačinskij 1974, 122-123; Olbrycht 2001a, 426-427; Polin 1992, 88.
4. Polin 1992, 94; Stolba 1993, 59-61; Simonenko 1994, 279; Skripkin 1994, 103.
5. Vinogradov 1997a, 111.
6. Vinogradov 1997a, 122.
7. Marčenko 1996, 72; Polin & Simonenko 1997, 92; Simonenko & Lobaj 1991, 78; Vinogradov 1997a, 123, n. 96; Vinogradov 1999, 57-58, 76.
8. Olbrycht 2001a, 442.
9. Sulimirski 1970, 102.
10. Vinogradov 1997a, 106; 1997b, 88-90.
11. *CIG* II p. 103-105; Karyškovskij 1971, 44; Karyškovskij & Klejman 1985, 67-68; Mačinskij 1971, 47; Smirnov 1984, 119; Vinogradov 1997a, 106; 1997b, 88, n. 98; cf., however, Harmatta 1950, 40-41; 1970, 11.
12. Simonenko & Lobaj 1991, 78; Polin & Simonenko 1997, 92.
13. See Tomaschek 1895, 845; Kissling 1910, 759.
14. See Vinogradov 1965, 108.
15. See Žebelev 1953, 177; Desjatčikov 1977, 46; Marčenko 1988, 113-114; Rostovtzeff 1922, 145; 1930, 577; Sulimirski 1970, 95, 103.
16. Harmatta 1950, 28; 1970, 34; Olbrycht 2001a, 446, 448.
17. Rostowzew 1931, 92, 126 ff.; Gracianskaja 1988, 34 ff.
18. Harmatta 1950, 6-7, 17; 1970, 14.
19. Sulimirski 1970, 102; Bosi 1994, 113.
20. Mačinskij 1974, 126.
21. Gracianskaja 1988, 33.
22. Chazanov 1984, 83, 198-202.
23. See Rudenko 1961, 3-4; Pletneva 1967, 180 ff.; 1982, 13 ff., 36 ff., 77 ff.

24. Harmatta 1994, 566.
25. Gavriljuk 1999, 155, 163-164, 168.
26. Vinogradov 1963, 148; Smirnov 1984, 118.
27. Blavatskaja 1959, 151-152; Harmatta 1950, 28; 1970, 34; Sulimirski 1970, 116; Vinogradov 1997b, 540; Olbrycht 2001b, 540.
28. Vinogradov 1963, 161.
29. Vinogradov 1994, 161, n. 64.
30. Chazanov 1984, 209, 211.
31. Olbrycht 2001a, 438 ff.; 2001b, 106 ff.
32. Vajnberg 1977, 176 ff., no. 6.
33. Olbrycht 2001b, 118.
34. Mielczarek 1989, 91, nos. 94, 96, 153.
35. Marčenko 1996; Vinogradov 1999.
36. Desjatčikov 1973, 143.
37. Mačinskij 1974, 131.
38. Molev 1994, 55.
39. Gajdukevič 1971, 328 ff., 337 ff., 362, 471.

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### Abbreviations

- IGCH* M. Thompson, Mørkholm, O. & C. Kraay (eds.), *An Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards*. New York 1973.
- IOSPE* B. Latyshev, *Inscriptiones antiquae orae septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*. Petropolis 1885-1916.