Moshchevaja Balka

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The find’s geographical context

- The graves are located in a ravine near the modern border between Russia and Georgia, near the Olympic city of Sochi.

- The local population associated the area with holy relics, though this did not preclude looting.
  - Knauer argues that this is why there are very few items made of precious metals among the items removed from the site.

- The Caucasus Mountains, in which Moshchevaja Balka is situated, provided refuge for various tribal confederations during the migration period, including the Huns, Alans, Avars, Khazars, and more.
The Caucasus Region
Or why throwing your hands in the air is a legitimate answer
The find’s historical context – The Alans

- The find likely dates from the eighth and ninth centuries. However this is not a concrete date, some scholars recommend accepting Ierusalimskaja’s dates only with caution.

- The Alans, or the Adygo-Alanic tribes, are associated with the Moschevaja Balka settlement and cemetery.

- The mountainous terrain has preserved the patchwork of linguistic and cultural identities in the Caucasus Region. Much to the joy of the Russian Empire and her successor states.

- The Alanic language as spoken by the Alans from about the 5th to the 11th centuries AD formed a dialect directly descended from the earlier Scytho-Sarmatian languages, and forming in its turn the ancestor of the Ossetic language. Byzantine Greek authors recorded only a few fragments of this language.

- Alans were famed for their mounted archers, as were many of the other steppe people.

- While some Alans stayed in the Caucasus, two other branches journeyed into Europe, with the Huns as either pursuers or allies (it’s hard to say). These groups joined up with other “barbarian hoards” enjoying their grand tour of the continent and eventually settled in Gaul, Iberia, North Africa, Romania, and Bulgaria.

- Alanic exonyms demonstrate the breadth of their trade and influence networks.
  - Greek: Αλανοί Alanoi, Αλαννοί Alannoi
  - Chinese: 阿蘭聊 Alanliao (Pinyin) in the 2nd century and 阿蘭 Alan (Pinyin) in the 3rd century
  - Latin: Alannus
    - Romans liked to conflate the Alans, Huns, and Goths into one big source of trouble.

- Alans eventually established their own kingdom, Alania, but were also settled in the neighboring kingdoms, including the Khazar Empire. Making distinguishing one group from the other super fun.
The find’s historical context – Silk Road

- The Silk Road was a network of interlinking trade routes linking South, East, and West Asia to Europe and North Africa.
- It began in the East as the Jade trade between the Tarim Basin and China.
- Eastern expansion of the Scythians and Persians and the conquests of Alexander the Great pushed the western side of the road into closer contact with the eastern trade routes.
- The Roman historian Florus records an embassy from “Serica” (People of silk) during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE).
- By the end of Augustus’ reign, some 120 ships a year were setting sail for India (Strabo II.5.12).
- Pilny the Elder, writing in the first century CE, describes a vast amount of trade between Rome and India, Seres, and the Arabian peninsula.
  - He was not impressed.
- Beginning in the third century CE, the Silk Road really hit its stride.
- The Sogdians, they of Samarkand, dominated the route from the fourth through the eighth centuries and their language became a lingua franca for trade.
  - The Sogdians were supported by the Uighur Empire, whose religion, Manicheism, the Uighurs adopted.
- With the fall of the Uighur Empire in 840, the Silk Road went through a period of instability, before being re-established under the Pax Mongolica in the 13th century.
Ierusalimskaja argues that the political climate of the Caucasus region from the sixth through ninth centuries pushed the trade routes north through the more perilous routes near Moshchevaja Balka.

- This was caused in large part, apparently, by high taxation in the Sassanid Empire.

One of the new routes passed through the Laba Pass, in the immediate vicinity of Moshchevaja Balka, and from there to the Black Sea.

Knauer argues that the political climate and pressures from the Sassanids make sense in the sixth and seventh centuries, but not the eighth and ninth, to which the find is dated.

Instead, Knauer points to two documents describing the political chessboard of the Caucasus in the sixth through tenth centuries

- Menander the Guardsman’s History
- Ahmad ibn Fadlan’s report of 923, on his mission to the Volga Bulgars

She argues that these two documents show that there was an established network of alliances and exploration that connected the Caucasus region with the wider world that existed without the taxation pressure of the defunct Sassanid Empire.
Local porters were probably paid in textiles by the merchants, a practice kept in place through the nineteenth century.

Similar situations are attested to in Bohemia in the tenth century and northern Crimea and southern Ukraine in the thirteenth century.
Men’s Clothing

Welcome to Caftans-r-Us
The generic horse archer costume (GHAC) remained basically unchanged in cut and decoration for centuries.

East Germanic peoples settled in the Pontic and Danube regions and took the clothes west after the invasion of the Huns in 375 CE.

Parthinians and Sasanians wore the same outfit.

When the Iranian (Parthinian and Sasanian) and East Germanic peoples met and mingled in the Roman military, they shared and spread the GHAC.

The GHAC (for men) consisted of the following elements:
- Shorts
- Leggings
- Caftan or coat (multiple layers)
- Boots

The equivalent women’s costume is harder to pin down.
- Maybe the same as men’s?
- The Moshchevaja Balka graves show distinct sexual dimorphism in the clothes.
- Contemporaneous Magyar finds show more similarity with men’s GHAC.
The Caftan

Figure 1. Proper left side of caftan in Figure 1.

Figure 2. Back of caftan in Figure 1.
Construction of the caftan is very specialized for mounted archery. The large dolman sleeves allow for freedom of movement and the two slits towards the back allow the skirt to cover the legs more fully while seated on horseback.

Main garment made of plainweave, undyed white linen with a medium hand.
- Lined with a yellow, long curly fur of indeterminate origin

The silk edging was polychrome
- Safflower?-dyed red
- Indigotin blue
- Iron mordent brown
- Other colors possible

Sewn with linen thread

Flat-felled seams were folded and finished towards the center of the units

Torso and skirt were finished separately then sewn together.
Another Caftan
By the period of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 8 CE), silk trimming was a regular feature in the steppe environment.

Prior to this, garments were trimmed with woven trim or fur.

Piping or trimming of the caftan was a common feature among the noble and common classes of the Parthians, Kushans, Sasanians, Hephthalites, Turks, Alans, and Khazars. It remained in fashion through the early medieval period in the Near East and Central Asia.
Lapels (so fancy!)

- Lapels do not feature on Parthian, Kushan, or Sasanian caftans, however they do appear in art from Hepthalite and Sogdian sites
  - Images of both sexes in single- and double-lapelled outfits appear in large sites like Samarkand and Pendjikent
- Knauer suggests that the political ascendance of the Western Turks in the Alan’s territory resulted in the adoption of lapels.

Western Turks wearing double-lapel caftans
Headwear

- Four panel construction.
- Adult’s hats cover the neck (b and c) while children’s hats (a) do not.
- Style a is a four panel hat that probably covered the tops of the ears.
  - Linen-lined silk or just linen panels
  - Leather trim
- Style b is a four panel hat that extended to the neck.
  - Linen panels
  - Band around the neck of checked linen to which are sewn brightly colored leather strips.
- Style c is a four panel hat that extended to the neck.
  - Made of leather, perhaps with a linen lining
  - May have had a fine silk shell
  - Wooden peg at the tip mounted on a piece of gilded leather?
  - May have been a helmet

Fig. 11: Männerhauben
Women’s Clothing

Is weird...
How do you solve a problem like Women’s Fashion?

- There is very little evidence for women’s clothing across the Eurasian steppe and in the Caucasus.
- Modern steppe people, like the Mongols, show slight dimorphism in everyday clothes (and not hats/headdress). But whether this represents the continuation of a medieval pattern or a more modern development is hard to say.

- Sogdian and Hunnic Women wore clothing comparatively more similar to their male counterparts.
- The women of the area around Moshchevaja Balka wore some of the weirdest clothes I have ever seen.
“Frauenkleid mit Brustlatz”

- Woman’s robe/dress with stomacher/bib
- T-Tunic shape
- Decorative appliqué around the neckline
  - Diamond shape in the middle of the chest appears on two extant examples
- Linen or nettlecloth
- Dimensions
  - Style a
    - Length: 4’ (122 cm)
    - Width: 3’ 5” (103 cm)
  - Style b
    - Length: 3’ 9” (115 cm)
    - Width: 2’ 9” (85 cm)
    - Sleeve length 1’ 8” (51 cm)

Fig. 15: Frauenkleid mit Brustlatz
Frauen-whatsits
Headdress - Complex

- Four part headdress found in the graves of two adult women. Designed to cover the hair completely.
  1. A narrow linen or, more rarely, silk band was tied around the forehead
  2. A hood with braidcase was placed on next. This had ties that could be tied under the chin.
    - The front of the hood was gathered under a rhomboid patch in the center front.
  3. A linen veil (3’ 3” x 4” [100 cm x 10 cm]) was worn over the hood and tied in the back of the head.
  4. A large veil of linen gauze (8’ 1” x 1’ 2.5” [250cm x 33-42cm]) was worn over everything and tied at the back of the neck. This veil was often fringed and decorated with a simple linear ornament on the narrow sides. In one case, the entire length of the veil was decorated with stripes in a red, geometric pattern and had red tassels.

- Each piece of the head dress was made out of a single piece of fabric rather than being pieced together out of scraps.
- Irusalimskaja makes no assumptions about the socio-economic status of the wearer of this headdress.

Fig. 12: Kopfputz für Frauen
The Hair Condom
Headdress - Simple

- **Type A**
  - A Round, relatively flat hood with a shortened, semi-oval front panel, decorated with a fur or leather trim, the latter consisting of narrow strips.
  - Silk outer with a fur lining.
  - Not associated with any particular grave, but Ierusalimskaja suggests it may have been a girl’s style (based on the size of the hats.)

- **Type B**
  - A cap in the style of the complex headdress’ hood but without the braid case.
  - Only one example of this style is extant, made of silk lined in plain linen.
  - Per Ierusalemskaja, the bows on top of the hats may have held a religious or magical significance.
Bibliography

