

THE DATE OF EARLIEST WESTERN EXPANSION OF THE KURGAN TRIBES

The American scholar Marija Gimbutas commented at the Prague symposium dedicated to the problems of the European Neolithic, on the important study of the Soviet archaeologist N. Ia. Merpert concerning the Eneolithic of the steppe zone in European U.S.S.R.¹ In a rather brief paper², she examined the chronology and expansion of the Kurgan culture in the North Pontic area, referring on this occasion to some questions closely related to Rumania's ancient history. Thus, on the one hand, she discussed the ties already reported between certain finds in the neolithic Mariupol cemetery, near the Sea of Azov, and those of Decea Mureşului, in Transylvania. On the other hand, on the base of the absolute dates attributed to the different stages of the Pontic steppes Kurgan culture and to certain of the stages of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, she tried to establish the date of the penetration of the Pontic steppe tribes into the south-west, into the Rumanian territory, and then farther on.

This paper aims at examining the validity of Marija Gimbutas' conclusions concerning these questions letting aside that of the cemetery of Decea Mureşului.

The fact that in some sites in the Soviet Union placed by T. Passek in her Tripolye B/I phase³, the first pottery sherds occur which can be attributed to the culture of the Pontic Kurgan tribes, serves M. Gimbutas to consider that «this is the period of the first expansion to the west and south» of the Pontic Kurgan tribes from east of the Dnieper. In our opinion, however, this dating cannot be accepted, because the finds recorded by M. Gimbutas do not denote an expansion. In fact, they represent the first direct *contacts* of the Kurgan tribes from the North Pontic area and east of the Dnieper with the tribes of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture. Single members of the Kurgan tribes had seemingly the contact with the inhabitants of the Tripolyan settlements and by this way stray objects typical of the Kurgan tribes found their way into the latter settlements. A similar position must be admitted in the case of some sites of the Pontic Kurgan tribes (Sredniy Stog II, for instance), on the Dnieper, where painted sherds characteristic of Tripolye B/II phase were found⁴. They likewise cannot be regarded as vestiges of an expansion, in this case of an eastern expansion of the Tripolye tribes. The gradual eastward expansion of the Tripolye tribes did not penetrate on the territory of the Pontic Kurgan

¹ N. Ia. Merpert, *L'énéolithique de la zone steppique de la partie européenne de l'U.R.S.S.*, in *L'Europe à la fin de l'âge de la pierre*, éd. de l'Acad. Tchéco-slovaque des Sciences, Prague, 1961, p. 176 and foll.

² M. Gimbutas, *Notes on the Chronology and*

Expansion of the Pitgrave Culture, in the same volume, p. 193 and foll.

³ N. Ia. Merpert, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁴ *Ibidem.*

tribes; nowhere on the Tripolye territory a layer older than that of the Tripolye culture has been found, which could have belonged to the Pontic Kurgan tribes. This is why the presence of foreign materials in the Tripolyan sites and likewise in those of the North Pontic steppe tribes can be explained only as the result of normal ties between the tribes of two neighbouring and at least partly contemporary cultures; on such occasions an infinitesimal number of individuals passed from the area of one culture into the other bringing with them some specific materials. The fact that in all the settlements of the Cucuteni A-B and Cucuteni B phases pottery of eastern origin has been found proves, as a matter of fact, that the contacts with the steppe cultures continued and that, most likely, some of the members of the latter settled on the Cucuteni—Tripolye area, and went on manufacturing their own pottery. The presence of the foreign material cannot be explained only by way of importation.

This interpretation — which alone seems to be proper — excludes the acceptance of the conclusion according to which the first incursion southwards and south-westwards of the North Pontic steppe tribes must be placed in the Cucuteni A — Tripolye B/I phase. More convincing proofs than those offered by the potsherds discussed above would be needed for making probable such an expansion. Such an intrusion should have inevitably brought about great destructions and implicate the seizure — at least partial and for a limited time — of the Cucuteni—Tripolye territory by the North Pontic tribes, during the Cucuteni A—Tripolye B/I phase. It would have consequently left traces reflected in the archaeological material. One could argue that settlements of that phase seem all to have been destroyed by violent fires. But the same applies also to the sites of the following phases (Cucuteni A-B and B), and as well for settlements of the preceding stages. If therefore these destructions were attributed to foreign raids, we should be obliged to admit that such incursions recurred quite regularly from time to time and that each time the intruders retired eastwards, from where they came. This would mean that intrusions were a periodical phenomenon, but such an explanation seems to us entirely unacceptable both in principle and because of the lack of well-grounded proofs.

Our objection is supported also by the circumstance that, at least west of the Prut, the earliest cultural elements which can be connected with the North Pontic Kurgan tribes appear only at the beginning of the Cucuteni A-B phase, being limited only to a rather insignificant number of potsherds. They can hardly be considered as an evidence of a foreign incursion, the more as they do not form a layer superimposed over the Cucuteni cultural remains. In fact they were found even under the ruins of the Cucutenian dwellings. Even if the presence of this pottery group of a foreign character (inadequately called Cucuteni C) in the Cucutenian settlements had to be looked upon as a proof of unfriendly relations, which resulted in that some members of the North Pontic Kurgan tribes were taken to the Cucuteni—Tripolye settlements as private slaves—which explanation we already proposed, with due reserve, on another occasion⁵, — even then the skirmishes between tribes of the neighbouring cultures could not be consi-

⁵ In fact it is probable that this explanation is not exact, precisely because the North Pontic sherds are found in all the sites of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, even in the westernmost, to begin with phase A-B. If we were to admit that in each Cucutenian settlement there were North Pontic slaves, then we should think of an endemic state of struggle between the tribes of these neighbouring cultures, ending mostly to the advantage of the Cucutenian tribes. Therefore it seems more likely to believe that these foreign materials belonged to certain

individuals of North Pontic tribes, who willingly came to various Cucutenian settlements and temporarily settled there, where they possibly worked on their pottery too. The purpose of such moves must be sought in intertribal barter, certainly quite frequent at that time. As a matter of fact, there can also be another explanation, namely that the said individuals should have belonged to the East Pontic tribes, and have settled in the Cucuteni and Tripolye sites, where they should have been admitted among the local tribes.

dered to represent a great expansion of these tribes, which through the area between the Dniester, the Carpathians and the Danube, reached far down to the west and the south. In our opinion, the proof of such an incursion could be furnished only by the presence of specific remains characteristic of the respective tribes found in a large number within the Cucutenian territory, particularly of their settlements and burials.

Remains of this type have been found, indeed, even in a rather great number, in certain areas; but they are all of a rather late date, certainly not of the Cucuteni A — Tripolye B/I phase. Earlier finds, in the Soviet Union⁶ as well as in the Rumanian People's Republic⁷ irrefutably attest to that barrow ochre graves have spread *in the region formerly occupied by the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture*, but the fact that in a series of cases they were superimposed over the sites of the *Cucuteni B — Tripolye C/I phase* shows their later date. Their stratigraphic position proves that east of the Prut, not only west of that river, the Pontic Kurgan tribes have entered the Cucutenian—Tripolyan territory only after the end of the Cucuteni B—Tripolye C/I — γ /I phases — which we consider to be the final phase of that culture — even if as already stated, isolated individuals might have penetrated even earlier on that region and settled there. Accordingly, the date of the first great western expansion of the Pontic steppe tribes must conform with the final date of the Cucuteni B phase. But before dealing with the latter question, some attention must be given to the Usatovo culture which, in our opinion, was closely related to the Pontic steppe Kurgan culture.

There is no room here for making a summary of all the views expressed about the Usatovo culture. But, taking into account all the known data, it can be assumed that it extended (at least in a preliminary phase) over the south-west of the Soviet Union and the extreme south-east of Rumania, over areas which were *never* inhabited by the Cucuteni—Tripolye tribes. Furthermore, in its essence, this was a culture of the North Pontic Kurgan tribes. A glance at the map of the diffusion of the sites and especially of the barrow-grave cemeteries belonging to the Usatovo culture from the above-mentioned region⁸ shows clearly that this was not the area of the diffusion of the settlements of the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture dating from the final phase Cucuteni B — Tripolye γ /I. The conclusion from the above can be drawn that all the Usatovo finds from the regions further to the west or north-west from the territory formerly occupied by the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture, are *posterior* to the earliest Usatovo traces and had reached those points exclusively owing to the intrusions of the Usatovo tribes. It is in no way possible to maintain that the expansion was directed inversely — that is, from west-north-west to east-south-east — so that in a final stage the Cucuteni—Tripolye tribes might have occupied the North Pontic steppe zone of the lower Dnieper and lower Dniester. We think that our second statement is fully justified by the circumstance that tumular graves are characteristic of the Usatovo culture, but were never specific for the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture, and that pottery of these graves is connected with that of the Pontic steppe.

All these facts and other ones which cannot be discussed here, authorise us to consider the Usatovo culture as a culture of the North Pontic tribes who used tumular graves, and that it represents the earliest considerable incursion to the south-west of the tribes who originally lived east of the Dnieper. We agree therefore with some of Marija Gimbutas' statements, but differ substantially in that the area of the earliest diffusion of the tumular graves (i. e. the Usatovo culture) west of the Dnieper did not correspond with that shown on map fig. 9

⁶ For instance at Vladimirovca.

⁷ As for instance at Glăvăneștii Vechi (see SCIV, I, 1950, p. 28—29), but in other places too.

⁸ See, for instance, the map of fig. 1 of T. Passek's work, *Периодизация трипольских поселений*, Москва-Ленинград, Изд. АН СССР, 1949.

in her paper. Another disagreement relates to the «megalithic tombs» near the Black Sea coast, in the Ukraine, which cannot be dated to the Bronze Age, since they are typical precisely of the Usatovo culture.

We think, therefore, that during the first phase, the Usatovo culture was possibly contemporary to the last phase (B) of the Cucuteni culture, and during a second phase, posterior to the latter⁹. In this way can be explained the presence of the painted pottery (very scarce, as a matter of fact), in certain Usatovo sites and graves of the first stage and its gradual disappearance after the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture had ceased to exist; at that second stage this pottery was found only occasionally. Accordingly the intrusion of the Pontic tribes (that is the Usatovian ones) into the area of the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture took place towards, or just at the end of the first Usatovo phase. It resulted in the destruction of the Cucutenian settlements of the Cucuteni B phase, and in the disappearance of their culture, whose bearers were, of course, for the most part subsequently assimilated. On the other hand, it seems very probable that in the south, in Dobrudja, the tribes of the tumular ochre graves had penetrated even at an earlier stage.

To return to our starting point, any attempt to place the first intrusion of the Pontic tribes west of the *Prut*, as early as in the Cucuteni A — Tripolye B/I phase cannot be accepted, because a real incursion of these tribes in Moldavia could have taken place only towards the end of the Cucuteni B — Tripolye γ /I phase or even after its end. This being so, it is clear that the proposed date for that first incursion must be submitted to discussion too.

The absolute chronology of the Neolithic of South-Eastern Europe is still the object of a very heated controversy, chiefly since the use of the Carbon-14 method; yet some dates can be fixed. If the Cucuteni A phase, in Rumanian terminology, is the equivalent of the Tripolye B/I stage, in T. Passek's scheme, it is almost quite certain that this phase cannot be dated between 2400—2300 and 2100 B.C., as M. Gimbutas believes¹⁰, on the ground of information obtained from I. Kutzián. We do not think necessary to record all former hypotheses on that subject; but we may say that until recently Rumanian archaeologists considered that the beginning of the Cucuteni A phase ought to be placed in the middle of the third millennium B.C., while its final date cannot be determined as yet, on account of the lack of really convincing finds. At any rate, it is towards the end of the Cucuteni A phase and the beginning of the Bronze Age (i.e. about 1700 B.C.) that the Cucuteni A-B and B phases must be placed, as well as the Usatovo-Gorodsk (Horodiștea—Foltești) culture and all the barrow-graves, with or without ochre, posterior to the latter.

Thus, it seems rather certain that the date 2100 B.C. in which M. Gimbutas places the end of the Cucuteni A — Tripolye B/I period, is too low; four hundred years represent too

⁹ Recently, D. Berciu (*Contribuții la problemele neoliticului în România în lumina noilor cercetări*, Ed. Acad. R.P.R., București, 1961, p. 138 and foll.) has considered that the first of these phases is characterized by the continuation of the painted pottery of Cucutenian origin, while the other is characterized by the disappearance of this kind of ceramics. The relation between the painted pottery of Horodiștea, for instance, and that of the Cucuteni B phase seems to him to «offer sufficient proofs regarding the uninterrupted continuity of the final phase and the Cucuteni B phase» (*ibidem*, p. 141). We, too, never con-

tested that the painted pottery of the Usatovo—Foltești—Gorodsk—Horodiștea culture was inherited from the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, but we do not think this to be a proof that the Usatovo—Gorodsk culture was a last phase of the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture. And if we were really to admit that the painted pottery was preserved only during the first phase of the Usatovo—Gorodsk culture, then implicitly we should admit that the expansion to the west and nord-west of tribes belonging to the latter began before the end of that first phase.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 197.

short a period within which the whole cultural evolution represented by the Cucuteni A-B and B phases and the Usatovo culture, and that of the other tumular graves as well could have been completed. And, at any rate, the scarce Carbon-14 dates we possess for the Cucuteni culture must also be taken into account when trying to determine the end date of the Cucuteni B phase, the time of the first important intrusion of the North Pontic tribes towards the Carpathians. We have, however, to admit that the respective C-14 dates were published only *after* the appearance of the paper by the American scholar, so that she could not have made use of them.

Recently, materials from two Cucutenian settlements of Moldavia, at Hăbășești and Valea Lupului, were dated by the Carbon-14 method. The first of these sites is of the middle stage of the Cucuteni A phase, the second of the final stage of Cucuteni B. The respective dates were about 3400 B.C. (according to the Suess correction¹¹) for Hăbășești and about 3000 B.C. for Valea Lupului¹². At the first sight both these dates seem to be too high when compared with those thought up to the last years valid for the chronology of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture; no wonder then that they arouse a certain scepticism. Indeed, for the Cucuteni A phase, the difference in dating is of about *one millenium*, and for the end of the Cucuteni B phase (which was placed at the beginning of the Bronze Age and sometimes even after the beginning of the Metals Age!) the difference amounts up to some 1300 years! As a matter of fact, even if the first of these dates could have some chances of being accepted, similarly as other high C-14 dates for many neolithic cultures of Central and South-East Europe, this could not be said of the second date which must be rejected definitely. In the first place, in adopting a long chronology one cannot suppose that the evolution of half of the Cucuteni A and the whole of the Cucuteni A-B and Cucuteni B phases could have taken place during a lapse of time of only 400 years. Secondly, even if, contrary to evidence, we were to accept the date 3000 B.C. for the final stage of the Cucuteni B phase, then consequently we would be forced to believe that the period of time between that date and the beginning of the Bronze Age was covered only by the remains of the Usatovo—Gorodsk culture and the barrow-graves west of the Prut, posterior to it, which is quite impossible. Certainly, the Carbon-14 examination of an ochre-grave in Dobrudja also gives a high date (about 2500 B.C. according to the Suess correction)¹³; but the fact, as already stated before, that some of the ochre tumular graves of Dobrudja were presumably of an earlier date than the tumular *post*-Cucutenian graves of Moldavia, cannot force us to accept the date of 3000 B.C. for the final stage of the Cucuteni B phase.

It is not the case to mention here all the arguments put forward in support of dating the end of the Cucuteni B phase to a time *after* the beginning of the second millenium B.C. But a find, recently brought into discussion¹⁴, enables us likewise to hold on to the «traditional» — we should say — date for the end of the Cucuteni B phase. Certain copper axes-adzes, found within the territory of the Cucuteni—Tripolye culture were commonly attributed to the Cucuteni B phase — which relates especially to the axes of this type from Tirgu-Ocna. However that opinion was contested too. After the recent publication of the hoard from Horodnica on the

¹¹ Vladimir Dumitrescu, *La civilisation de Cucuteni*, in «Berichten van de rijksdienst voor het oudheidkundig bodemonderzoek», 9, 1959, p. 6 and foll.; cf. p. 48 (Gro. 1985 = 3130 ± 80 B.C., which, according to the Suess correction, means approximately 3400 B.C.).

¹² H. Quitta, *Zur Frage der ältesten Bandkeramik in Mitteleuropa*, in PZ, XXXVIII, 1960, p. 153 and

foll.; cf. p. 184 (Gro. 1982 = 2750 ± 60 B.C., that is circa 3000 B.C. according to the Suess correction).

¹³ D. Berciu, *op. cit.*, p. 124, approximately 2231 ± 61 B.C. (Gro. 1995), accordingly circa 2500, after the Suess correction.

¹⁴ T. Sulimirski, *Copper Hoard from Horodnica on the Dniester*, in MAGW, XCI, 1961, p. 91—97.

upper Dniester in the Ukrainian S.S.R. no doubts can be raised as to that those axes were known to the Cucutenian tribes of phase B. This copper hoard embracing tools and objects of adornment was found in a painted Cucutenian vase¹⁵; among the tools was an axe-adze of the described type¹⁶. A large portion of pottery, found on that side was characteristic of the Cucuteni A-B phase, but the recipient in which the deposit was hidden belonged quite certainly to the Cucuteni B phase, namely to its later stage, as it must correspond with Hubert Schmidt's ϵ style group. It is sure, therefore, that the vase and its content cannot be dated to a stage intermediate between the Tripolye B/II phase and the γ /I one, as T. Sulimirski is inclined to think¹⁷, but only to the Cucuteni B stage, that is to Tripolye γ /I.

This is not a proper place here for resuming the discussion concerning the origin and diffusion of that type of copper axes-adzes, even if there were some new elements to add to those recently reviewed by T. Sulimirski. But it is quite certain that we can subscribe to his conclusion about their dating: «All the objects which formed part of the copper hoard from Horodnica were apparently of the same date and can be approximately placed at the turn of the third and second milleniums B.C., or at the very beginning of the second millenium B.C. This is indicated by their close association with copper objects typical of the Bodrogkeresztur of the Hungarian Plain on the one hand (axe-adzes in particular), and with those of the royal barrow-graves of Kuban (beads, diadem), on the other¹⁸».

In conclusion of that what was briefly expounded in this paper, we must say that the first incursion of the tribes of the North Pontic tumular graves into the area of the diffusion of the Cucuteni — Tripolye culture *cannot* be placed in the Cucuteni A phase, but only at the end of the Cucuteni B phase, fact which is generally known to investigators of the Cucuteni — Tripolye culture. On the other hand, that incursion was certainly *posterior* to 2300 B.C., to which date M. Gimbutas placed it. As for the Dobrudja intrusion, we always thought that the North Pontic steppes tribes reached that province before occupying Moldavia, and thus the date of 2500 B.C., given by Carbon-14 for the ochre-grave at Hamangia — Baia seems, as yet, reasonable. Whether the same date can be given to other cultural elements from Dobrudja related to these graves, is a problem which the researchers who in recent years have effected a good many diggings in Dobrudja are called upon to solve.

VLADIMIR DUMITRESCU

¹⁵ *Ibidem.* pl. I/6.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.* pl. I/1.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.* p. 96.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*