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The Cut of the Clothes of North Caucasian Alans

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to reconstruct the evolution of costume cut through the examination of examples of North Caucasian Alan costume dated to the 8th-13th centuries AD. The analysis indicates that the cut of Alan clothes was based on the Central Asian pattern with a smooth bodice-sleeve line. The cut changed with the gradual transition from felt to fabric of fixed width and length. Many questions remain controversial yet a new line of inquiry into the cut of excavated sewn clothes is proposed.

Keywords: Middle Ages, North Caucasian Alans, Moshchevaya Balka, Lower Arkhyz, clothes, cut, sewing, costume reconstruction

Introduction

A good state of preservation of organic material, including almost intact clothes, in the rock cemeteries of the North Caucasus enables us to study the cut of the Alan costume (Ierusalimskaya 1996; Orfionskaya 2000, 105-108; Runich 1971, 167-178; Savchenko 1999, 125-141). The Alans were a coalition of Iranian-speaking tribes who came to the North Caucasus from Central Asia, probably from the area east of the Aral Sea, in the early centuries AD. In the 1st millennium AD they occupied key positions in Central Ciscaucasia and constituted a substantial political power to be reckoned with, not only for their immediate neighbours but also for all nations whose interests clashed at this historical crossroads. Important trade and military routes ran through the Alan territory and the Alans were thus involved in the relations between early medieval superpowers, namely Byzantium and Iran, Turkic and Khazar Khaganates and the Arab Caliphate. A series of Irano-Byzantine wars in the 6th century AD was a fight for the control over the main caravan routes, especially the Great Silk Route. There were two branches of the Silk Route: the southern running from China via Afghanistan and Iran to Syria and Byzantium, and the northern running via Central Asia and the Aral Region to the North Pontic Greek cities (Lubo-Lesnichenko 1994, 234-246). While Iran controlled the major land part of the Great Silk Route, Byzantium held practically all the approaches to the Black Sea shores. Irano-Byzantine wars blocked the

western end of the southern land branch of the Silk Route (via Iran) and thus revived its North Caucasian branch (China – the Usturt Plateau – the Caspian Region – the North Caucasus – the Pontic Region). The latter ran through the land of the Alans who became involved in the functioning of trade roads. The intensification of trade along the North Caucasian branch of the Silk Route resulted in an influx of silk fabrics to the region which, in its turn, influenced the cut of Alan clothes. Changes in both male and female costume could also have been brought about by the infiltration of the Turkic population, probably belonging to a Bulgar tribal union from the Azov Region, since the late 6th century AD.

Male Alan dress

Although Alan male costume, judging from the archaeological record, consisted of one or two caftans, trousers, leggings, footwear, and headgear, in this paper we deal solely with caftans. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood regards Alan caftans as originating from the south of Central Asia (Vogelsang-Eastwood 2004, 209-224). This area was inhabited by nomadic stockbreeders. Sychev linked the origin of clothes with economy and suggested that stockbreeding milieu gave rise to the garment based on a piece of felt (Sychev 1977, 38). This conclusion is quite plausible: it can be surmised that the caftan evolved gradually from a certain felt garment. Felt is characterized by its physical adaptability; one can manufacture felt

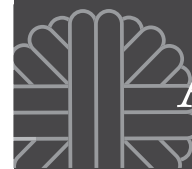
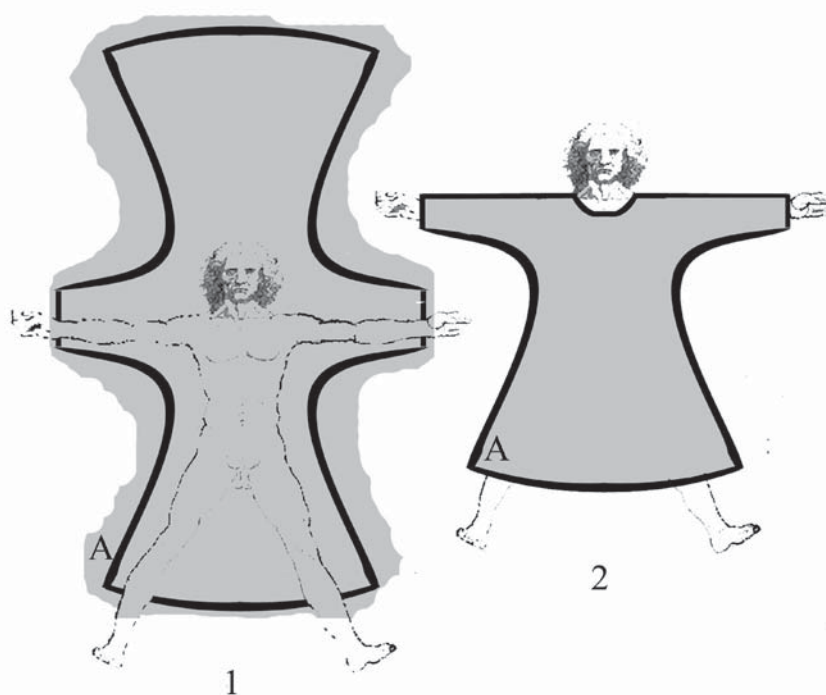


Fig. 1. Clothes of Central Asian cut (Drawing; author).

1 – A variety of the emergence of the Central Asian cut based on the use of a felt sheet (A); the outline of the cut reproduces that of the human body with allowance for the unrestricted movements of arms and legs;
2 – general appearance of the basic clothes of Central Asian type.



fabrics of any shape and size, being guided solely by the intended shape and size of the end product. Let us illustrate this point by analogy with footwear. The earliest shape of footwear was based on the outline of a foot and a device fixing this piece to the foot. The same is probably true of the case when a suitable body cover was cut from a large piece of felt (Fig. 1). The salient trait of this cut is a smooth line of the side seam and a widening hem.

A textile fragment, probably a part of an outer garment with a central slit, was discovered in the Lisakovo cemetery of the 12th century BC in Kazakhstan (Central Asia). This piece was made of several layers and the right side consisted of narrow strips of braided wool which were sewn together (Orfinskaya and Golikov 2010, 120). It seems therefore likely that in this territory there existed a certain cut in which narrow strips braided wool could have been sewn together, thus forming the surface of a garment. We shall call such a cut with a smooth line from the waist to the sleeve Central Asian and surmise that it represents the origin of the early medieval Alan clothes.

The Moshchevaya Balka cemetery is one of the renowned North Caucasian Alan sites. Its materials are kept in the Hermitage (Ierusalimskaja 1996). A good state of preservation of the organic material, including almost intact clothes, in the rock cemeteries of the North Caucasus is due to climatic conditions and peculiarities of funerary rites (Ierusalimskaya 1996; Orfinskaya 2000, 105-108; Runich 1971, 167-

178; Savchenko 1999, 125-141). The presence of silks in Moshchevaia Balka is accounted for by its location on a branch of the Silk Route. There exists, however, a network of lesser known cemeteries yielding early medieval textiles. They are kept mostly in the Karachai-Circassian Museum-Reserve (KCMR) in Cherkessk, in the Karachai-Circassian Republic of Russia (Golikov et al. 1998, 133-140). In this paper, we will use this collection to analyse the cut of the clothes from the North Caucasian rock cemeteries (for the description of the relevant textiles cf. Orfinskaya 2001, 269-449).

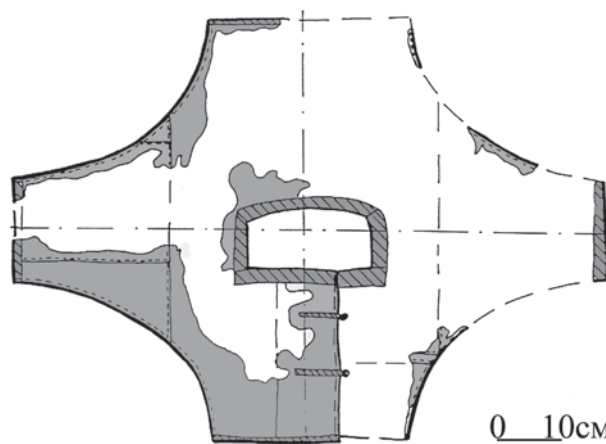


Fig. 2. Child's shirt (KCMR no. 9107/107) (Author's drawing).

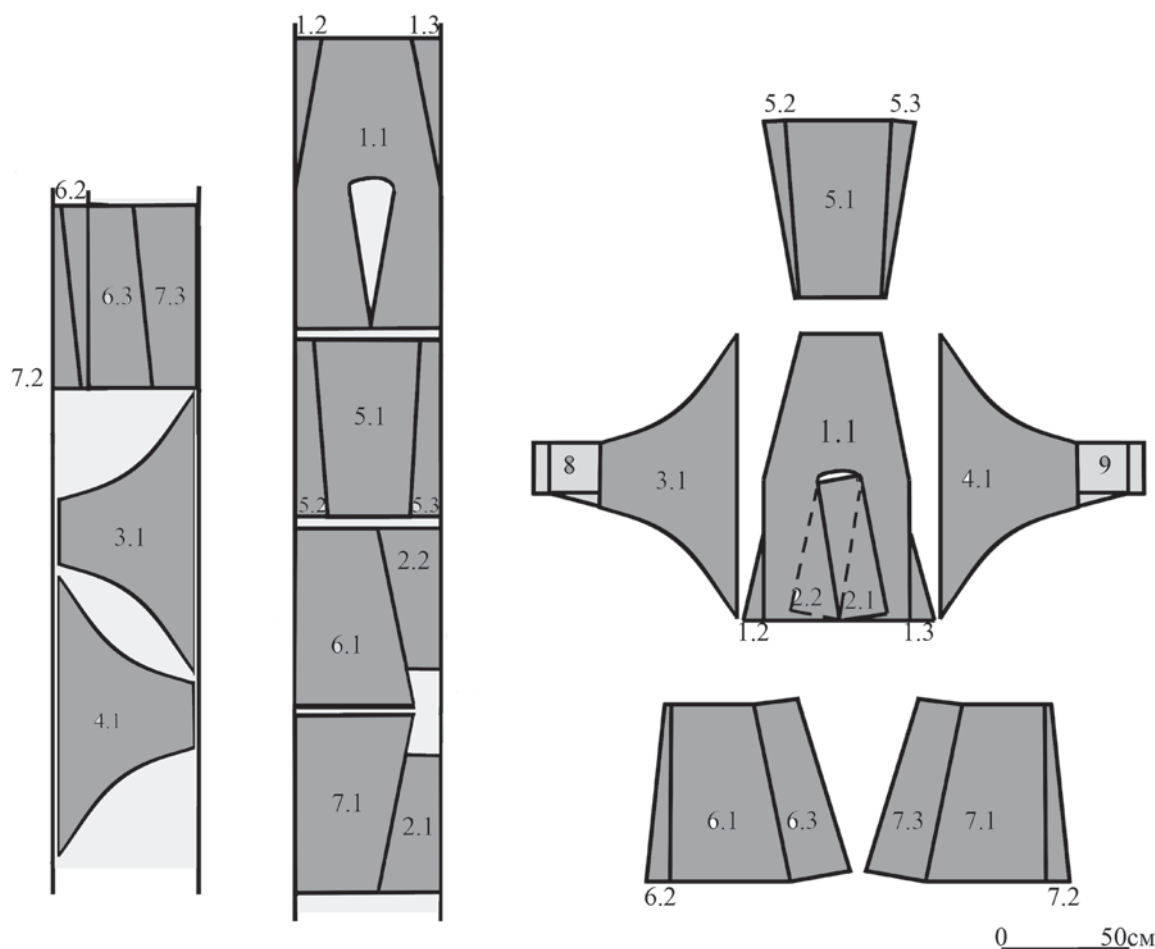


Fig. 3. Man's caftan (KCMR no. 10269/1). Cut and arrangement of the cut on fabric (Drawing: author).

1.1– Bodice of the caftan. 2.1 – Upper right flap; 2.2 – Inner left flap. 3.1 – Right sleeve. 4.1 – Left sleeve. 5.1 – Skirt, back, basic detail; 5.2 and 5.3 – Skirt, back, side gussets. 6.1 – Skirt, upper right part, basic detail; 6.2 – side gusset of the front right part of the skirt; 6.3 – right flap of the skirt. 7.1 – Skirt, front left part, basic detail; 7.2 – Side gusset of the front left part of the skirt; 7.3 – Left flap of the skirt. 8 and 9 – Double cuffs.

Some 6 m of fabric with a piece 56-58 cm wide were needed to make such a caftan.

The basic cut of a child's shirt (KCMR no. 9107/107)¹ is 'Central Asian' with a smooth line running in an arc from the waist to the sleeve (Fig. 2). Caftans of an adult man and a teenage boy (KCMR nos. 10269/1; 9537/16) show the same basic cut (Fig. 3). The cut of other men's caftans (KCMR nos. 9644/2; 3971/88; 6235/80.a), however, changed. What conditions may account for it?

Any change may be caused by both external and internal factors. The former include the movement of human populations (migration), goods (trade), ideas (religion and philosophy), and technologies. Although Alania's location on the Silk Route was conducive to external influence, the gradual changes of the cut of

the most widespread linen garment, however, seem more likely to be due to internal reasons. It can be surmised that it was due to the change in the attitude towards the fabric used to make clothes. If we accept that the original Central Asian pattern was based on felt having no restrictions on its width and length, the choice of fabric prone to such restrictions entailed its more sparing use. Thus, a man's caftan (KCMR no. 9644/2) has sleeves consisting of four pieces (Fig. 4). It is a striking example of the transformation of a smooth waist-sleeve line into a broken line formed by regular geometric patterns, i.e. triangles and rectangles, which, in their turn, were cut from rectangles with sides running along the warp and weft threads. The cut of a

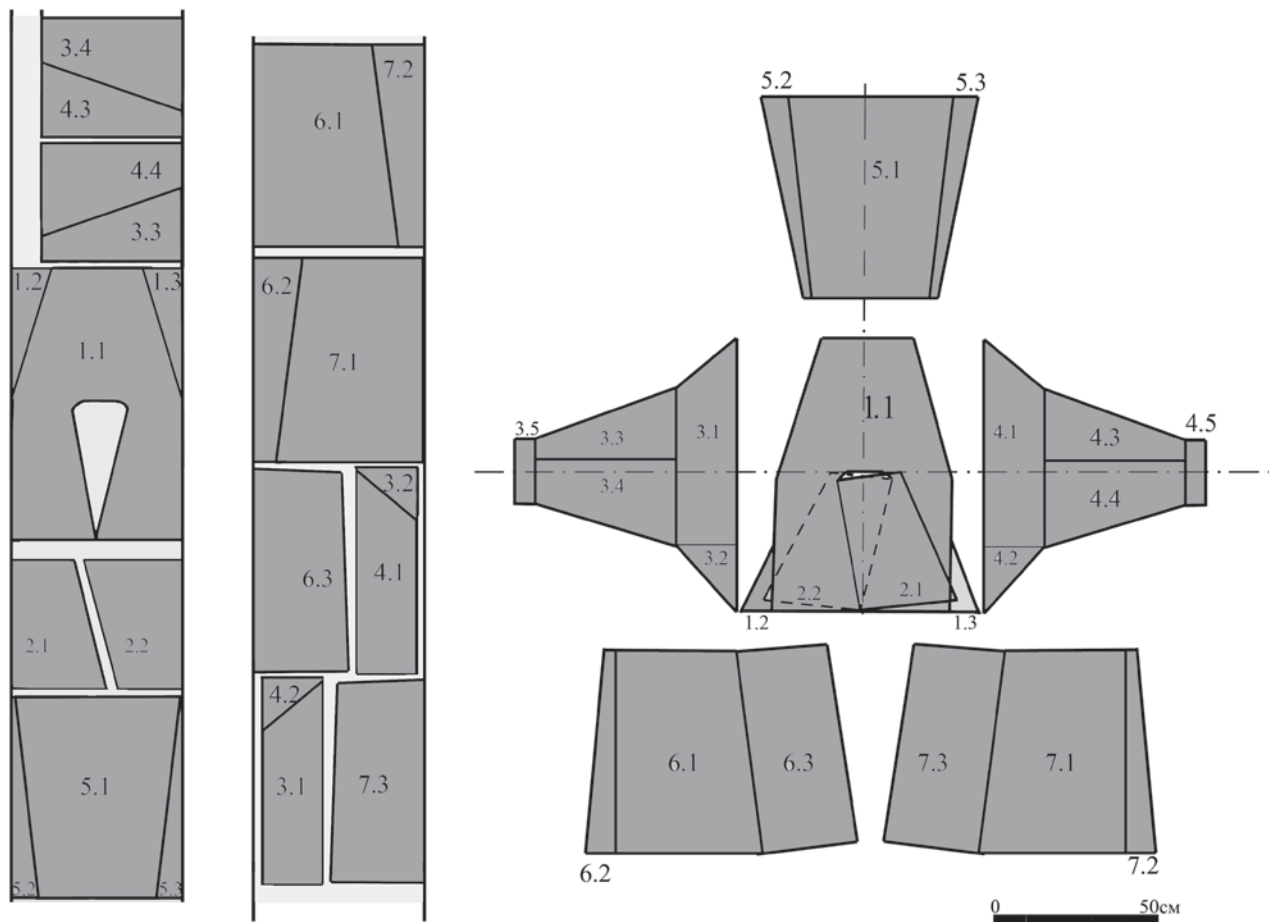


Fig. 4. Man's caftan (KCMR no. 9644/2). The cut and its arrangement on fabric (Drawing: author).

1.1– Bodice of the caftan. 2.1 – Upper right flap; 2.2 – Inner left flap. 3.1–4 – Details of the right sleeve; 3.5 – Cuff. 4.1–4 – Details of the left sleeve; 4.5 – Cuff. 5.1 – Back of the skirt, basic detail; 5.2 and 5.3 – Back of the skirt, side gussets. 6.1 – Skirt, upper front part, basic detail; 6.2 – Side gusset of the front right part of the skirt; 6.3 – Right flap of the skirt. 7.1 – Skirt, front left part, basic detail; 7.2 – side gusset of the front left part of the skirt; 7.3 – left flap of the skirt.

Some 5.5 m of fabric with a piece 52 cm wide were needed to make such a caftan.

caftan from the Metropolitan Museum (Kajitani 2001, 96; Knauer 2001, 125-154) is intermediate between those shown in Figures 3 and 4.

The division of the basic cut into the upper and lower parts could have been caused by several reasons not related to the sparing use of fabric, which does not take place under such conditions. It might be due to the lack of woven pieces of required length. The length of a piece for a pattern without a waist seam must average two lengths of the garment. If a seam is made, several smaller pieces for bodice and skirt are needed. Thus, the division of the pattern into the upper and lower parts likely took place in the milieu where short fabric pieces were manufactured. It can be

surmised that the pattern with a detachable skirt and oriental sleeves was brought to the North Caucasus by the Alans. The second reason is the widening of the hem, which would have been especially important for a horseman's caftan. Folds are the simplest means of doing it, but in this case they are not used. Alan caftans are widened through insertion of side gussets and vents, which may be reminiscent of the basic cut where the hem widening is attained by means of a curved line of the side seam.

Thus, setting apart the skirt in the Alan male costume led neither to the more sparing use of fabric nor to the widening of the hem by means of folds. It seems likely that the separation of the skirt is related to the length

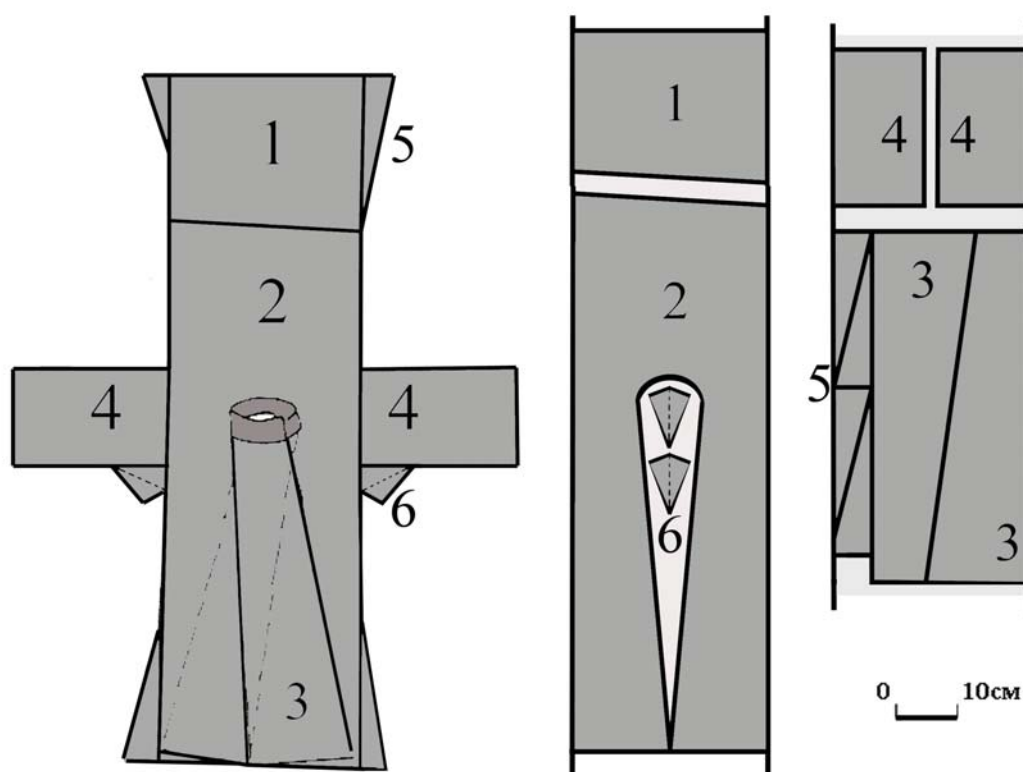


Fig. 5. Child's caftan (KCMR no. 3969/88). The cut and its arrangement on fabric (Drawing: author).
1 – Bodice, back; 2 – Bodice, basic part; 3 – Upper right and lower left flaps; 4 – Sleeves; 5 – Side gussets of the bodice; 6 – Gussets.

of the woven piece available at the time of change-over from felt to fabric².

A child's caftan (KCMR no. 3969/88) is based on a piece 30 cm wide (Fig. 5). It differs from the adult's caftan in the position of sleeves with respect to warp threads. The sleeves of the child's caftan are positioned along the piece³ while those of adult men's caftans are crosswise. A small gusset was sewn into the lower part of the sleeve to widen it. Such a change in the cut may be due to the change-over from the 'Central Asian' to the tunic-shaped cut more suited to woven fabrics⁴.

Let us turn again to the standard cut of a male caftan. Its bodice has two gussets transplanted from the back to the front part. These gussets, cut from the back, make it narrow at the waist and consequently make the shoulders square. The same gussets sewn into the front part of the garment widen the waistline, which is perfectly reasonable if a man has a paunch. Changes in the design of the man's caftan were probably due to

the emergence of a new standard of beauty: a stately, portly, i.e. well-fed, man.

Silk caftans should be treated separately. They are exemplified by a caftan in a fabric with a *senmurv* pattern from Moshchevaya Balka described by Ierusalimskaya (1978). Its cut differs from those of all the other specimens we examined. It can be accounted for either by its unique character or, which cannot be excluded, by an error of judgment on the part of the researcher (Ierusalimskaya 1978, 183-213, Fig. 17; the same pattern is reproduced in Ierusalimskaya 2012, 240, Fig. 142, i.e. it has not been reviewed in 35 years). Photographs show that mythical beasts on the bodice and skirt are positioned with their heads up. The same is true of the back part (Ierusalimskaya 2012, 235, Fig. 139). It seems likely that it was the intention to place these beasts in the natural position that led to the appearance of the shoulder seam. Yet, the surviving part of a sleeve shows *senmurvs* upside down (Knauer

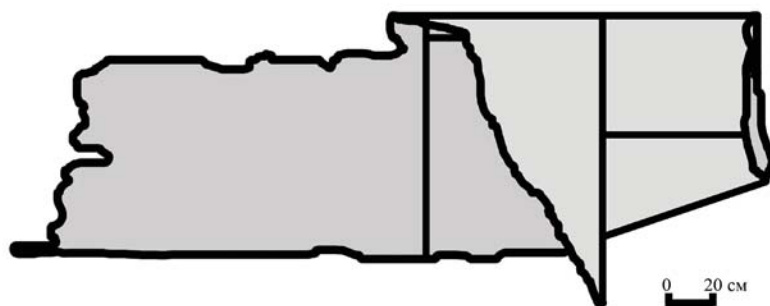
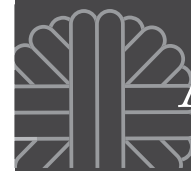


Fig. 6. Fragment of man's silk caftan from the collection of the Karachai-Circassian Museum (KCMR No. 9243/79) (Drawing: author).

2001, 129, Fig. 5). Thus, an assumption that the decorative pattern on fabric was regarded as a 'text' accounts for the position of *senmurvs* on the bodice and skirt but not for their placement on the sleeves. There can be several answers to the problem: 1) fabrics were in short supply; 2) the 'text' was not supposed to be read on sleeves; 3) the decorative pattern was not perceived as a text. No unambiguous solution can be obtained at present, yet it is evident that the sleeve of the caftan was cut along warp threads. A fragment of another caftan from the Hermitage collection made of Sogdian silk with a fur lining shows that the silk fabric of the sleeve was also oriented along warp threads (Ierusalimskaya 2012, 216, Fig. 132)⁵. A fragment of a caftan from the Lower Arkhyz reflects a similar line of joining of the bodice and sleeve and the spread of silk fabric on the sleeve (Fig. 6). Ierusalimskaya, while describing the large caftan from Moshchevaya Balka, insists that the 'local manufacture of this garment

is beyond doubt' (Ierusalimskaya 2012, 238). Yet, is it possible that these caftans were brought to the Caucasus ready-made.

It can be inferred that costly silk caftans were cut according to a modified pattern. This modification could be due to the use of ornamented fabrics. What all the caftans of this group have in common is the cut of the skirt, the narrowed back and the smooth sleeve-bodice line.

The analysis of the Alan male caftan hence indicates the following:

- 'Central Asian' pattern was divided into two parts, the upper and the lower, when the transition from felt to woven fabric took place. The division could have been conditioned by the restricted dimensions of the woven fabric pieces used.

- Alan tribes brought this pattern to the North Caucasus (Table 1, Im) where textiles were probably rare, which would explain the need for a more economical cut. The local linen fabric may have been used at that time, resulting in the division of the sleeve area into two parts (Table 1, II_m).

- Changes in the bodice and sleeve patterns took place while making expensive silk caftans, probably taking into account the orientation of the decorative pattern on the main fabric (Table 1, III_w). Making of the élite local silk dress was heavily influenced by external factors.

- A child's caftan with a straight sleeve and a small gusset in its lower part made of plain linen fabric represents the ultimate change of pattern (Table 1, IV_m), when a re-orientation of the sleeve fabric took place.

- Child's shirts of groups Im and III_m were recovered from one and the same burial which is indicative of the synchronous presence of several cut varieties.

- The connection between the first three groups and group IV is still elusive.

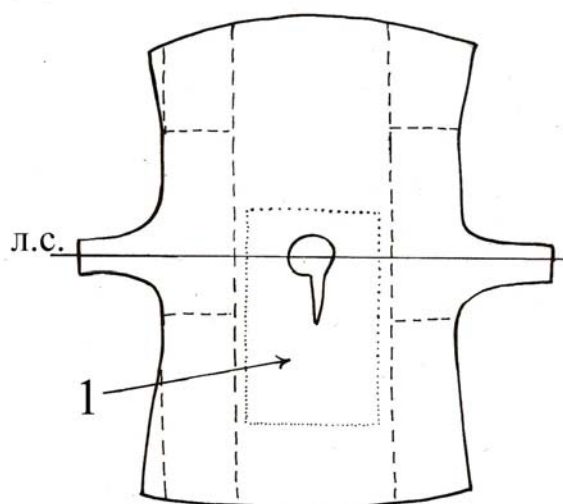


Fig. 7. Woman's dress (K3 6696, cat. 10) from the Moshchevaya Balka cemetery (After Ierusalimskaya 1992, Fig. 43).

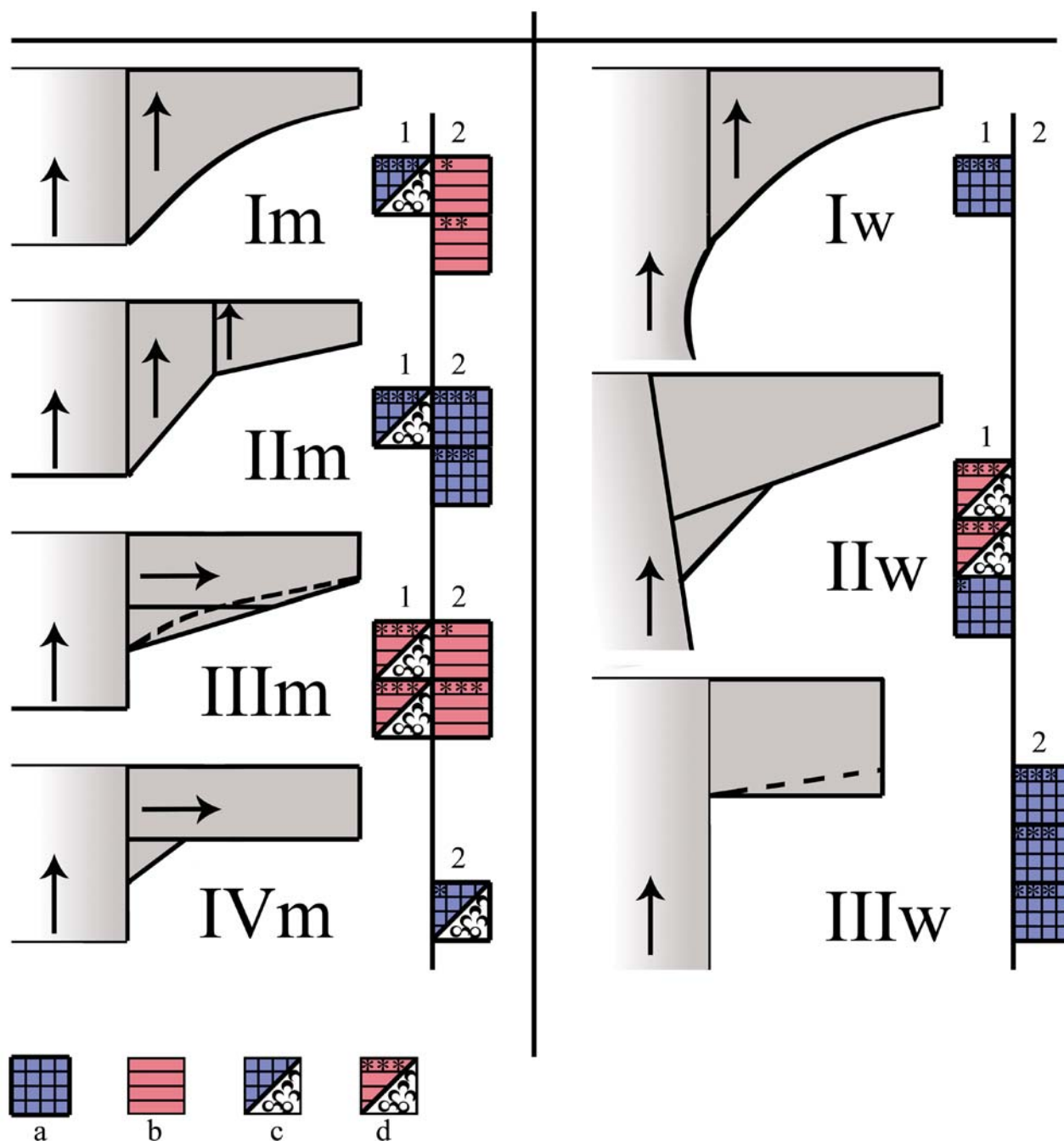
1 – patch pocket; л.с. – bend line.

Female Alan dress

While the Moshchevaya Balka cemetery dates primarily to the 8th-9th centuries AD, the date of the



Table 1. Diagram of different sleeve constructions (Drawing: author).



Lower Arkhyz cemetery, which is closely related to the Lower Arhyz settlement, may be extended to the 13th century AD (Tichonov 1997, 105-116). The cut of the female dress from the two cemeteries differs markedly. Dresses from Moshchevaya Balka may be earlier than those from the Lower Arkhyz. All the female dresses have a wide bodice and sleeves.

They are high-necked, with a small stand-up collar and a central slit covered with a breast pocket⁶. The catalogue of the exhibition 'Caucasus on the Silk Route' (Ierusalimskaya 1992, 43) presents cuts of an adult and a child dress from Moshchevaya Balka. The former (Fig. 7) fully fits within the Central Asian cut. It is also worth noting that this pattern demonstrates

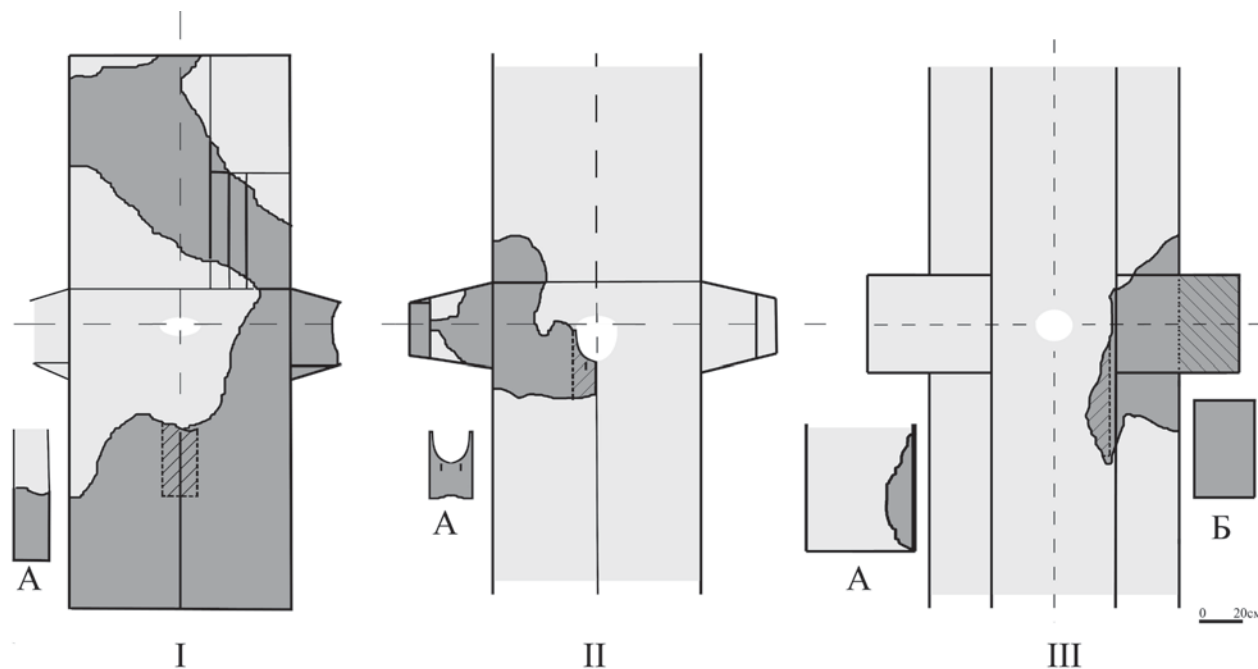


Fig. 8. Women's dresses from the Low Arkhyz cemetery (Drawing: author).

I – Dress (KCMR no. 6235/82), neckline unknown. II – Dress (KCMR no. 9541/34), length cannot be determined. III – Dress (KCMR no. 10288/17), neckline and length cannot be determined; width of the central sheet is calculated on the assumption that the side part amounts to half of the width of the woven piece. A – a patch detail of breast pocket; B – detail of lining sewn on the inner side of the sleeve.

clearly how the fabric was adjusted to the cut. The child's dress has a bodice consisting of the central sheet and wedge-shaped side parts onto which are sewn rectangular sleeves (the direction of warp threads is unknown) with triangular gussets in the lower part. Two women's fur coats also belong to this group in terms of their general pattern, even if various details differ, such as the absence of pockets (Ierusalimskaya 1992, 41, 42).

Female dresses from the Lower Arkhyz cemetery (KCMR nos 6235/82, 9541/34, 10288/17) have a straight wide bodice and sewn on sleeves (Fig. 8). The bodice of one dress consists of the central sheet with sewn on sleeves and two side parts. No smooth line of the side seam ever occurs in the robes from Lower Arkhyz.

As can be seen in Table 1, the female dresses from the two cemeteries have nothing in common. While Moshchevaya Balka has yielded two interconnected groups (I and II), the third group is present only in Lower Arkhyz. There appears to be no connection between the first two and the third group. Could the Lower Arkhyz robes be worn by representatives of another ethnic group? Unfortunately, we do not have a complete picture Scythian, Sarmatian and Khazar



Fig. 9. Polovtsian caftan from the Chingul barrow (After Elkina 1983, Fig. 82).



clothes patterns. Therefore, it is impossible to date the change of the basic cut. However, the subsequent evolution of the Alan caftan can be traced. Thus, Elkina reconstructed the cut of a Polovtsian caftan from the Chingul barrow (Fig. 9; Elkina 1983, 82). The pattern is not complete but two gussets sewn into the front piece of the bodice, similar to those of Alan caftans, are well-marked. This small detail indicates the relationship of two forms, the Alan and the Polovtsian. There is, however, a distinction between the two patterns, ie. the means of widening the skirt hem. The skirt of the Polovtsian caftan is gathered at the waist but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

This paper by no means intends to present a complete reconstruction of the evolution of the Alan clothes' cut from its emergence to the present. It is merely an attempt to distinguish the original cut whose development can only be traced approximately. The following conclusions can be tentatively put forward:

- Alan clothes were based on Central Asian cut connected to the use of felt for clothing.
- The change of the cut was caused by the transition from felt to woven fabric.
- At the initial stage of change the fabric was adjusted to the cut, ie. laid out as a flat surface out of which the required pattern was cut.
- The second, transitional, stage only saw small-scale changes. The pattern remains Central Asian, yet it is cut with allowance made for the sparing use of fabric, ie. the cut is adjusted to the fabric. Ultimately, this change of the male caftan pattern (excluding large silk specimens) was due probably to the attained equilibrium between the comfort of the garment and the expenses of its manufacture.
- At the third stage the properties of fabric prevail and dictate a new pattern of cut. Central Asian type of female clothes gradually becomes tunic-shaped. As to male linen caftans, such a transition is recorded only for children's clothes. The change of the pattern of large caftans was probably due to the use of patterned silk. At this stage the influence of external factors increases. Thus, Ierusalimskaya suggests that ready-made tunics were imported from the Mediterranean to the Caucasus (Ierusalimskaya 2012, 226; this assumption is based solely on the find of a cut-out tapestry wool gusset of a tunic). Maybe it was the imported tunics that had formed the general appearance of the 'new' Alan garment. If so, only the outline was copied, since warp threads of the classical tunic run crosswise to the human body and not along it as in the 'tunic-shaped' clothes. Alan robes have a big breast pocket uncharacteristic of the tunic.

- Female clothes yield two groups of shapes whose connection cannot be traced as yet.

– A gradual change of the cut was taking place in the clothes of the North Caucasian Alans in the 8th-13th centuries AD. Earlier forms with a smooth waist-sleeve line and more recent forms with straight lines of the cut can be recognized. A closer look at the textiles from different collections may help to get a fuller picture of the process.

To conclude, Central Asian pattern appears to originate from clothes whose pattern was based on the use of felt. It is characterized by a smooth transition from the bodice to the sleeve and a semicircular neckline with a straight line on the back. Other basic cuts, eg. those that emerged with the use of animal hides, can also be distinguished. The proposed sequence of clothes' patterns, though far from being perfect, enables us to trace certain trends in the evolution of the cut of Alan costume.

Notes

1. Regrettably, the materials come mostly from looted burials. Therefore, clothes cannot be linked to excavated skeletons and cannot be dated more precisely than the lifetime of the relevant cemeteries.
2. It is unclear where this change took place.
3. The tunic of Tutankhamen (Crowfoot 1941, 113-130) and a whole series of other known Egyptian tunics (Hall 2001, 30-36; Kemp 2001, 187-220; Egyptian Textiles 2009, 56) were sewn of a piece placed along the torso. The sleeves were cut like the bodice – along the warp threads. It was possible since the Egyptians were able to weave long linen fabrics for making clothes (Chvostov 1914, 18-19).
4. Tunic-shaped clothes originate from linen tunics of Egypt where sheets of fabric up to 8–9 m long were woven (Chvostov 1914, 18). These tunics are made of fabric worn over the shoulders whose warp threads run along the torso. The sleeves were also cut along the warp threads. The neck was round.
5. The fabric orientation along warp threads on sleeves may be accounted for by small dimensions of the pieces of the expensive cloth. We do not know how strict were the requirements imposed on the pattern and what traits should be regarded as 'right' or 'wrong.'
6. The shape of pockets varies from narrow and long to wide and short. Probably this detail was not regulated.

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