

Early Cultures of the Lands of the Scythians

Adapted from a Russian text by Boris Piotrovsky
The State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad

The Maikop Culture

Late 3rd millennium B.C.

[*Catalogue nos. 1-3*]

In 1897 a princely tomb was excavated in the town of Maikop in the northern Caucasus. Covered by a mound almost thirty-five feet high was a large burial chamber, over twelve by seventeen feet, with wooden walls and paved with river stones. Wooden partitions divided the tomb into three areas: the principal burial was in the largest, southern part. The skeleton, painted red, was lying on its back with legs drawn up, and great quantities of objects, some of gold and silver, lay on and around it. There were two gold diadems decorated with double rosettes, a necklace of rows of gold, lazurite, turquoise, and carnelian beads, and headdress pendants of massive gold wire. The dead man had been placed under a canopy decorated with numerous gold plaques: thirty-eight were ring-shaped, while sixty-eight represented lions and nineteen represented bulls (color plate 2, cat. no. 1). Four gold and silver poles have been identified as supports for this canopy, and each ended in sculptures of bulls cast in gold or silver (cat. no. 2). Flint arrowheads and flint inlays from a knife lay near the skeleton's knees, and in various parts of the chamber were found a great number of tools and weapons; in the southeastern corner, for instance, were some made of copper: axes, a chisel, and a flat dagger with a curving blade fastened to the hilt with silver pins. There were also many vessels: seventeen stood along the eastern wall—two of gold, one of stone with gold and silver inlay, and the rest of silver. Two of the silver vases had remarkable decoration. Along the rim of one a mountain range was depicted, with a bear standing on its hind legs between two trees; on the

vessel's body were two rivers that flowed into a circle representing a lake or sea; also shown were two bulls, a horse, a lion with a bird of prey on its back, a wild boar, an antelope, and a mountain sheep. On the second vase, besides some ornamental motifs, appears a scene of predators attacking a bull and a goat.

The grave's other two rooms contained additional burials—of a man and a woman—with considerably less rich inventory: gold and carnelian beads, earrings of gold wire, and various clay and copper vessels.

The Maikop burial, combining works of art of high quality with rather primitive flint and copper tools, is outstanding because it heralds the coming of a new epoch in the history of the Caucasus. This was the tomb of a chieftain of a rich tribe of livestock-breeders that had dealings with the more civilized countries to the south. Many of the objects found here are doubtlessly of foreign manufacture: the designs on the silver vases and the gold plaques showing lions and bulls bear witness to a connection with Near Eastern cultures. The beads are made of exotic materials: the carnelian and turquoise came from Transcaucasia and Iran, the lazurite from Central Asia. Tools and weapons with curved blades fastened to the hilt with silver pins have analogies with Achaean objects, more specifically Trojan ones. Thus the Maikop burial gives a vivid picture of the interchange between a group of herdsmen and their more sophisticated neighbors: in exchange for cattle, driven south and southwest, the tribes of the North Caucasus received precious objects.

This kurgan characterizes a culture widespread in the North Caucasus during the Copper Age. At first scholars dated the Maikop kurgan anywhere from the late fourth or early third millennium to the eighth century B.C.; now, on the basis of other local finds, it is convincingly dated to the late third millennium B.C.

The Maikop kurgan has analogies in other regions of the Near East: in date, character, and general appearance it can be compared to the famous burial at Alaça Hüyük in Anatolia, which preceded the formation of the Hittite state, and to the large sepulcher at Til-Barsip in northern Syria. There had been rich burials in the more southerly regions of the Near East even earlier, at the beginning of the third millennium B.C., such as the so-called Royal Cemetery excavated in the ancient Sumerian town of Ur.

The Koban Culture

Early 1st millennium B.C.

[*Catalogue nos. 4-9*]

The Bronze Age in the southern Caucasus—the nineteenth to fourteenth centuries B.C.—is represented by remarkable monuments such as a kurgan in the Trialeti region of Georgia and in Kirovakan in northern Armenia. These were graves of chieftains of prosperous cattle-breeding tribes that maintained relations with the countries of the Near East. The chieftain's ashes were placed on a wooden carriage in the center of a large funerary chamber (like the burial ritual of the Hatti kings). Around the carriage lay skeletons of long-horned and short-horned cattle, as well as painted or polished vessels, sometimes with carved or stamped ornament. The tools and weapons placed in the graves were made of bronze: copper alloyed during smelting with arsenic or, in a newer technique, with tin (which had to be imported from afar). Objects of precious metals testified to the high development of the goldsmiths' art; there were cups and goblets of silver or gold (some with chased or relief decoration), pins, and beads with granulated ornament.

In the Kirovakan kurgan were found silver vessels that are similar in shape and details to the famous gold goblets found at Vaphio in Greece.

In somewhat later burials in Armenia (15th-14th century B.C.), at Lchashen and Artik, foreign objects such as cylindrical Hurrian seals were found. Such seals, associated with the state of Mitanni in Syria, are found throughout a large area from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea, and in the North Caucasus. Analogies for the gold and bronze objects found at Lchashen and Artik can be found in Ras Shamra (Ugarit) and in Mari, along the middle of the Euphrates river. Assyrian and Ugaritic documents describe the routes from the kingdom of the Hatti to Assyria used by merchant caravans bringing tin from the far west; roads to the southern Caucasus branched out from the main caravan routes, and led from the Hatti town of Kanesh into the Assyrian cities of Nineveh and Assur.

At the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium B.C., important centers of Bronze Age culture appeared in the Caucasus, Iran, and the Near East, all having connections with regions producing metal ores. Along with cattle, metal objects became the main items of barter. Archaeological work in the Caucasus has revealed a number of individual cultures, outstanding in the originality of their artifacts and, despite a general similarity of bronze wares (axes, battle axes, swords, daggers, arrowheads, spearheads), with local differences. The cattle-breeding tribes became only semi-nomadic as they took over mountainous areas, where high-altitude pastureland provided more continuous grazing for their herds; into their hands thus fell ore-bearing locations, so the development of metallurgy occurred among these tribes.

The most famous monument of Bronze Age culture in

the Caucasus is the Koban burial of North Ossetia. Discovered near the village of Verkhonii Koban in 1869, it consisted of numerous stone boxes in which the skeletons lay on their side with legs drawn up, as well as a great quantity of bronze weapons and ornaments. Very characteristic are small bronze axes of elegant shape, often with engraved designs – animals, geometric motifs, and scenes connected with religious beliefs: one of them, for example, shows a man with a bow in his hand, battling seven snakes, which can be interpreted as a scene from an Ossetian epic recounting the struggle of the hero Amran with seven snakes. The handles of these axes are usually wood, but some are bronze.

The burial contained many daggers, of two types: one with a wooden handle, and the other cast in one piece, with handles often decorated with small sculptured animals.

The other bronze objects are numerous and varied: there are belts made of sheet bronze with figural clasps, fibulae (fasteners like safety pins), bracelets for arms and legs, pins, and beads. Of special interest are the bronze amulets—small figures of horses, dogs, stags, rams, and birds (seldom human beings). Many of these statuettes or pendants are remarkable for their elegance and laconic forms; the decorative pendants in the shape of rams' heads with wide horns are especially handsome (cat. no. 9). All these pieces are executed in bronze of high quality; by the late second and early first millennium B.C., the tribes in this area knew of iron, but it was used only for decoration, as in the inlay of the flat belt clasp shown in color plate 2 (cat. no. 8).

Since 1869 other cemeteries similar to the Koban burial have been found. Collecting Caucasian bronze objects became a passion for many archaeologists and amateurs in Russia and western Europe, although the

careful study of the Bronze Age in the Caucasus only began early in the twentieth century. Koban objects, such as bronze belts and axes, have been found along the northern shores of the Black Sea region and up to the Dnieper area, and can also be found in burials in the southern Caucasus, where there was another culture very close to that of Koban.

The Culture of Urartu

9th–beginning of the 6th century B.C.

{ Catalogue nos. 10-16 }

During the first half of the second millennium B.C., the Hurrians (who had come into the Near East from the north early in the third millennium B.C.) dominated most of Syria and northern Mesopotamia under the control of Mitannian overlords. Around 1000 B.C., after the fall of the Mitannian state, a Hurrian tribe, called the Nairi, began to unite in northeastern Anatolia. In the ninth century B.C. these tribes created a new state in the region of Lake Van in present-day Turkey, which immediately became a competitor of Assyria: Assyrians called this state Urartu. In Urartean inscriptions, the center of their territory was called the country of the Biainili, a word preserved in the name of Lake Van.

The earliest written information about the Urartians occurs on monuments of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III who, from the first year of his reign, 860 B.C., led uninterrupted wars against his northern neighbors. These campaigns are described in his annals and depicted on the bronze gates of a temple at Balawat near Nineveh: the scenes show Assyrian armies leaving their camp, crossing the mountains, and battling the Urartians—storming fort-

resses and returning with loot and prisoners.

Despite this opposition, the Urartean state quickly became powerful, and in the first half of the eighth century B.C. extended its rule over a wide area.

Having entered into an alliance with the small states in northern Syria, the Urartians took possession of the lands down to the western bend of the Euphrates river, gaining control of a main route to the Mediterranean from the southern Caucasus. Simultaneously they started to subjugate the southern Caucasus itself, including the fertile valley of the middle Araxes river and the mountains of Armenia, rich in copper ore and in cattle. Overcoming the resistance of local chieftains, the Urartians seized the land around Mount Ararat and Lake Sevan (the largest lake in Transcaucasia, in central Armenia), and established military and administrative centers there. In 782 B.C. the Urartian king Argishti I founded Erebuni, a fortress on the northern edge of the Araxes valley, where he settled 6,600 prisoners; somewhat later he founded Argishtihinili ("built by King Argishti"), a large city on the banks of the Araxes.

Assyria could not stand by indifferently as Urartu expanded and grew more powerful. During the reign of Argishti's son, Sarduri II (764-735), the Assyrians undertook two campaigns against Urartu, in 743 and 735 B.C. In the second, they reached and besieged the Urartian capital of Tushpa. Under Sarduri II Cimmerians are first mentioned as being present in the land of the Mannai, to the south of Lake Urmia in Iran; two groups, Cimmerians and Scythians, seem to be referred to in Urartian and Assyrian texts, but it is not always clear whether the terms indicate two distinct peoples or simply mounted nomads. The Assyrian royal archive, found in their capital of Nineveh, contains some remarkable documents, reports from Assyrian scouts in neigh-

boring countries. The most interesting of these is a dispatch from the crown prince Sennacherib, who reports that Cimmerian nomads were marching against Urartu and had inflicted a defeat on the Urartian forces, listing the names of the Urartian commanders who fell in battle. Sargon, encouraged by this defeat to his archenemy, led an ambitious campaign against Urartu in 714 B.C. It ended in a complete victory for the Assyrians, which is described in a long text on a clay tablet found at Assur, while scenes from the campaign, such as the plundering of the Urartian temple in Musasir, southeast of Lake Van, are represented on the walls of the royal palace at Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad).

After the Assyrian victory of 714 B.C., the Urartian government was reformed; the old administrative centers were abolished and replaced by new ones. The second rise of Urartu is connected with King Rusas II, who ruled in the first half of the seventh century B.C. The Urartian culture of this period is well known from the excavations of the Teishebaini fortress, on the hill Karmir-Blur near Erivan, which replaced the earlier fortress, Erebuni. Objects from the treasury of Erebuni were transferred to Teishebaini; an inscription describing the founding of the new fortress mentions that the "sacred weapons" were brought in and, indeed, during the excavations objects with the names of the earlier Urartian kings of the eighth century B.C. were found: shields (with inscriptions saying they were made by Argishti I for Erebuni), quivers (cat. no. 12), helmets, bronze cups (cat. nos. 10, 11), and horse trappings.

The excavations at Teishebaini provided a vivid picture of life in a Urartian city of the seventh and early sixth centuries B.C. Agriculture, cattle raising, and crafts were all highly developed; especially important is the wide distribution of iron implements and weapons at

this site. As a result of Urartean influence, iron came into common use in the southern Caucasus in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

The Teishebaini excavations also produced good examples of Urartean art, which had previously been known only from accidental finds and from the excavations of the fortress at Toprak-Kale, near Tushpa, the Urartean capital. In the eighties of the past century, some bronze statuettes, originally covered with gold leaf, appeared in the possession of dealers; these proved to be parts of a Urartean ceremonial throne (or two such thrones) that had been found by villagers at Toprak-Kale. The statuettes passed into various museums (The British Museum, the Louvre, the Berlin museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the Brussels museum, the Hermitage); among the four statuettes in the Hermitage, the most outstanding is the small figure of a winged lion with human torso (color plate 2, cat. no. 14): the face is of white stone, with colored stone inlays. These small figures belong to the courtly art of Urartu, similar in style to that of Assyria.

The diverse finds at Teishebaini testify to Urartu's widespread contacts: they include Egyptian amulets, Mediterranean jewelry and ceramics, Assyrian seals and bronzes, and Iranian beads and seals. Of special interest are works indicating the connections between Urartu and the Scythians: these consist of Scythian arrowheads (trihedral and forked), iron *akinakes* (the Scythian short sword), and horse trappings—some of horn, others of bronze in the shape of griffins' or birds' heads, and cheekpieces with an animal head at one end and a hoof at the other, similar to those found as far north as the Dnieper region.

In the seventh century Urartean relations with the Scythians were peaceful. This worried the Assyrian kings

Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, a concern reflected in the questions asked of the oracles and requests in hymns to the gods. At this period the Assyrians were involved in constant struggles with the nomads to the north. The Scyths (called "Ashguzai" and "Ishkuzai" by Esarhaddon) were also in the Mannean region: Esarhaddon mentions an Assyrian defeat in a raid led by the Scythians, and the god Shamash is asked whether the Scythian king, Partatua, will remain friendly if Esarhaddon allows his daughter to become the Scythian's wife, as Partatua had requested.

From archaeological data, from cuneiform tablets, and from information supplied by Herodotus, we know the Cimmerians and Scythians remained in the Near East many years, and participated in the destruction of Assyria and other ancient Near Eastern centers. For instance, Babylonian chronicles of 616-609 B.C., describing the fall of Assyria, tell that nomadic tribes (referred to as "Umman mán-da") joined the Babylonian and Median armies in the siege and capture of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Herodotus, in describing their siege, mentions that a large Scythian army appeared under the walls of Nineveh led by Madyes, son of Protothyas (the Partatua of the cuneiform sources).

Also connected with the Scythians' stay in the Near East are the objects thought to have been found at the end of the Second World War in a fortress at Zawiyeh, in Iranian Kurdistan. These pieces fall into three categories: Assyrian works of the eighth century B.C., seized as booty; local objects; and pieces combining ancient Near Eastern and Scythian styles. In the latter, one encounters Near Eastern motifs—such as the adoration of the sacred tree—that had obviously lost their original meaning, since figures that used to form a definite composition are now arbitrarily placed; there are also rep-

representations of Scythian themes, such as panthers or stags with broad antlers. Especially characteristic of Zawiyeh objects is a strongly stylized tree of life, which is also encountered on Urartean bronze belts from Teishebaini and from other areas influenced by Urartean culture. Sacred trees similar to the Urartean ones are also represented on some Scythian objects, such as the gold sheaths for *akinakes* found in the North Caucasus at Kelermes and in the Ukraine at the Melgunov kurgan, which are the most striking examples of Urartean artistic influence among the objects found in Scythian tombs.

Thus Urartu was very important in transmitting ancient Near Eastern elements to Scythian art of the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century B.C. But after the occupation of Tushpa by the Medes in the beginning of the sixth century B.C., the Scythians struck a decisive blow against the northern Urartean centers and destroyed them.

The Scythian Culture

End of the 7th-4th centuries B.C.

[*Cat. nos. 17-92*]

The origins of the Scythians are murky. Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century B.C., tells three stories of their beginnings: that they came from Asia and displaced the Cimmerians from the area north of the Black Sea; that they claimed to be descended from Targitaus, the son of Zeus and the daughter of the Borysthenes river (the Dnieper); and that their ancestor Scythes was the son of Heracles and a creature—half-woman, half-snake—who dwelt in the Scythian woodland. Archaeology seems to confirm both ideas, of an Asian origin and a local devel-

opment. In 1902 the archaeologist V. A. Gorodtsov, on the basis of his excavations, suggested that the most ancient peoples of the northern shores of the Black Sea could be divided into three cultures, according to the strikingly different ways in which they built their tombs: the pit-grave culture, the catacomb-grave culture, and the timber-grave culture. This theory has been supported and made more precise by later archaeological work. The tombs of the catacomb culture date from the beginning and middle of the second millennium B.C.; they belonged to a Bronze Age people with a developed bronze metallurgy, whose economy was based on semi-nomadic cattle-breeding and agriculture. They had already established relations with other cultures.

In the middle of the second millennium B.C., the catacomb people were replaced on the north shore of the Black Sea by the timber-grave people, whose tombs were built like log cabins. This culture had developed to the east, in the region around the Volga river and the southern Urals, and had spread over a vast territory, remaining in existence until the mid-eighth century B.C. Again, its characteristics were a highly developed bronze metallurgy and semi-nomadic cattle-breeding, but with special emphasis on horse-breeding. Recent studies have convincingly suggested that the Cimmerians represent tribes of a late stage of the timber-grave culture; they were well-armed horsemen who could move easily over long distances.

The tribes of the Scythian culture developed on the foundation of the late timber-grave culture of the eighth century B.C. This could explain the two ancient ideas of Scythian origins, the one involving migration and the local one, since the timber-grave culture had been spread by peoples moving westward into the Black Sea region from Asia.

The earliest typically Scythian artifacts (primarily horse equipment) have been found over a wide area. They occur as far north as the Kiev area on the Dnieper, in the Kuban region (the northeast shore of the Black Sea), in the northern and southern Caucasus, in central Urartu, and in Iran. Within the same territory, and even further into the Near East, have been found characteristic Scythian bronze arrowheads of the second half of the seventh century B.C.

This archaeological evidence is borne out by historical records that refer to the presence of nomads in the Near East during the eighth and seventh century B.C. (It should be mentioned, however, that Assyrian and Urartean documents call these nomads by several names, and it is not always certain whether the terms really indicate distinct, identifiable groups or are meant to imply "nomads" in general; so this documentary evidence should be interpreted with care.)

As mentioned earlier, beginning in the second half of the eighth century B.C., Assyrian sources refer to nomads identified as the Cimmerians; other Assyrian sources say these people were present in the land of the Mannai (south of Lake Urmia in Iran) and in Cappadocia for a hundred years, and record their advances into Asia Minor and Egypt. The Assyrians used Cimmerians in their army as mercenaries; a legal document of 679 B.C. refers to an Assyrian "commander of the Cimmerian regiment"; but in other Assyrian documents they are called "the seed of runaways who know neither vows to the gods nor oaths."

Scythians are apparently first mentioned at the end of the first half of the seventh century B.C., in the texts of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.); called "Ashguzai" or "Ishkuzai," they are said to be in the land of the Mannai. Scholars explain their advance into

the Near East in various ways, suggesting that the climate along the north shore of the Black Sea changed, thus forcing the Scythians to search for new grazing grounds, or that a constant inclination toward pillaging is a specific psychological characteristic of nomadic peoples. Another possible explanation, however, is economic. The Near Eastern kingdoms had, for the most part, switched to an economy based on agriculture with extensive irrigation, and their own cattle-breeding was replaced by the import of livestock. The Scythian tribes of the northern shores of the Black Sea must have possessed a considerable surplus of cattle and, since they moved with great ease, began driving part of their herds south of the Caucasian mountains. In exchange for cattle, the Scythians received the merchandise they needed: iron, copper, and tin, as well as textiles and jewelry.

Gradually, these commercial relations may have led to less peaceful ones as barter was replaced by seizure, when the nomads discovered their military superiority over the sedentary farmers who lived on the outskirts of the Near Eastern states. The Scythian invasion may also have been encouraged by the great changes that had taken place in the political life of the ancient Near East in the second half of the eighth century B.C., as the old states grew weaker and new ones started to appear; in this inner struggle the nomads (referred to collectively as "Umman mánda") played an important role.

Herodotus gives the following account of their stay:

A numerous horde of Scyths, under their king Madyes, son of Protothyes, burst into Asia in pursuit of the Cimmerians whom they had driven out of Europe, and entered the Median territory. . . . the Scythians [had] turned out of the straight course, and took the upper route, which is much

longer, keeping the Caucasus upon their right. The Scythians, having thus invaded Media, were opposed by the Medes, who gave them battle, but, being defeated, lost their empire. The Scythians became masters of Asia.

After this they marched forward with the design of invading Egypt. When they had reached Palestine, however, Psammetichus the Egyptian king met them with gifts and prayers, and prevailed upon them to advance no further. On their return, passing through Ascalon, a city of Syria, the greater part of them went their way without doing any damage; but some few who lagged behind pillaged the temple of Celestial Aphrodite. . . .

The dominion of the Scythians over Asia lasted twenty-eight years, during which time their insolence and oppression spread ruin on every side. For besides the regular tribute, they exacted from the several nations additional imposts, which they fixed at pleasure; and further, they scoured the country and plundered every one of whatever they could. At length Cyaxares and the Medes invited the greater part of them to a banquet, and made them drunk with wine, after which they were all massacred. The Medes then recovered their empire, and had the same extent of dominion as before. (Book I, 103-106.)¹

The Scythians' contact with Near East is reflected in Scythian art of the late seventh to sixth century B.C. (Many of these pieces have traditionally been dated to the sixth century B.C., which increases the discrepancy

¹ From "The Greek Historians," edited by Francis R. B. Godolphin. Copyright 1942 and renewed 1970 by Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

between the first written mention of Scythians and actual Scythian objects in this area.) The works said to have come from Zawiyeh, south of Lake Urmia, have already been mentioned; these pieces of the late seventh and early sixth century B.C. combine ancient Near Eastern motifs like the tree of life with Scythian ones, like panthers and reclining stags.

A similar combination of Near Eastern and Scythian motifs occurs on works of art found in two early Scythian kurgans, at Kelermes in the North Caucasus and at the Melgunov kurgan in the Ukraine. At both sites was found an iron *akinakes* (the Scythian short sword) whose hilt and scabbard are covered with sheets of gold. Both are decorated with representations reminiscent of pieces from Zawiyeh. Some motifs seem to have lost their meaning (winged genii who fertilize the sacred tree on Assyrian and Urartean works are separate entities, detached from the tree), suggesting that they were copied from Urartean objects—a theory corroborated by the way the animals' bodies are rendered: as flat designs with minute all-over patterns. But Scythian scabbards, unlike Urartean ones, had a projection at the side by which they were attached to the belt; thus the artist, having no model to copy for this part, decorated this projection with Scythian motifs, a reclining stag and birds' heads, executed in a purely Scythian style, a blocky modeling in relief with no patterning.

We do not appreciate sufficiently the role that the copying of individual elements played in ancient art. A round silver-gilt mirror found at Kelermes is another example of such copying of foreign pieces (color plate 4, cat. no. 25). Its relationship to Ionian art was pointed out long ago, but its technique and composition are very different: the motifs were probably copied from several different works. Still another example is the decoration

on a ceremonial axe covered with gold leaf (color plate 7), also from Kelermes. Various animals are distributed on the axe itself and on its handle, while the sacred tree is shown on a separate panel from the distorted figure of the genius; only the depiction of a reclining stag indicates the Scythian origin of this piece, which is decorated in a manner that at first glance seems rather odd.

These Scythian objects date from the end of the seventh or the beginning of the sixth century B.C., the same date as the pieces from Zawiyeh. It has been suggested that the Scythian style originated in the Near East, but it is important to point out that, on the contrary, the so-called Scythian animal style is found over a wide territory in the steppes even by the seventh century B.C. In the Golden Kurgan in Kazakhstan, far to the east, S. S. Chernikov has discovered remarkable gold plaques in the shape of panthers and reclining stags that had been used to decorate a quiver (color plate 4, cat. no. 29), as well as some bronze arrowheads of the archaic Scythian type of the seventh century B.C. (cat. no. 30). Farther east, at Tuva, M. P. Gryaznov found a bronze in the shape of a curled-up predator, which is analogous to gold "Scytho-Siberian" plaques that are dated even earlier.

By the time Herodotus wrote, in the middle of the fifth century B.C., the Scythians of the Black Sea area were grouped into a large confederation of separate tribes. In its most precise form, the term "Scythians" refers to some tribes who lived on the northern shores of the Black Sea, but the "Scythian culture" was shared by various tribes spread over a large territory, with similar ways of life and close interrelations, promoted by nomadic cattle-breeding. The horse made direct communication possible between people living at great distances from each other, and it is no mere coincidence that horse equipment, specifically, is similar over the whole terri-

tory inhabited by tribes of the so-called Scythian culture.

According to Herodotus, in the regions of the lower Bug and Dnieper rivers lived the Callipidae (whom Herodotus calls a "Graeco-Scythian race" since the important Greek trading post of Olbia was nearby) and the Alazonians; both tribes raised corn. Still further north were the "Scythian cultivators," who also grew corn, though not for their own use but for sale. To the east of the Dnieper, stretching eastward along the steppes, were the territories of the nomad Scythians, "who neither plough nor sow." And farther east lived the Royal Scyths, "the largest and bravest of the Scythian tribes." The objects in this exhibition come from kurgans in various regions and must have belonged to different tribes, although they are closely similar.

Herodotus describes the nomad Scythians' way of life, with wagons transporting their belongings as they followed their vast herds of cattle and horses. Although he says Scythians had no fortified towns, this must apply only to nomads along the steppes, since we know of Scythian fortified settlements in other regions. For instance, a large settlement called Kamenskoye, an important trading post, has been unearthed near the Dnieper. The lower Dnieper was probably the religious center for the Scythian tribes; some of the richest kurgans are found in this area, which might explain Herodotus' remark that the burials of the nomad chieftains lay far from their own territories.

The first Greek settlements on the northern shores of the Black Sea appeared in the second half of the seventh century B.C. and soon became flourishing trading cities. From the first, they were in close contact with the local peoples, because Scythia was a rich source of grain, cattle, and fish for mainland Greece and the Greek colonies in Anatolia. One of the most significant of these Greek

cities was Olbia, which Herodotus visited to collect information on the Scythians. In exchange for produce, Greeks provided the Scythians with luxury objects—jewelry, weapons, vessels—many decorated with representations of Scythians. Relations between the Greek colonies and Scythians were not always peaceful: fifth-century Scythian settlements began to be surrounded by ramparts and ditches, and Greek towns were provided with stout defensive walls.

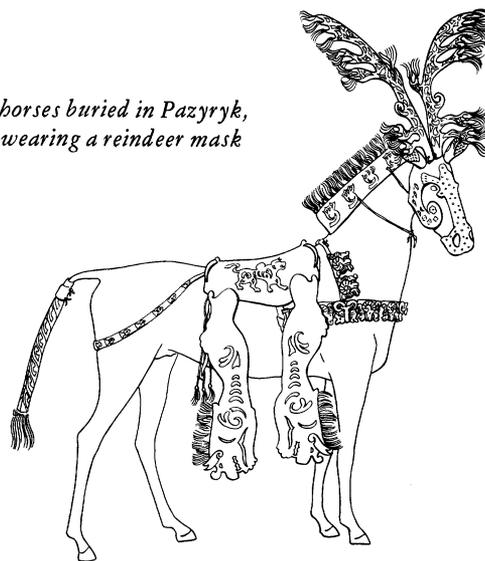
We have little certain information about later Scythian history. Herodotus describes the Persian campaign of the late sixth century B.C., in which Darius attempted to subdue them; the Persians left after a fruitless and embarrassing trek through Scythian territory. There is also a semi-legendary story of the Scythian king Atheas, who led a successful war against the Thracians who lived south of the Danube and whose culture was similar to the Scythians'; Atheas fell in battle in 339 B.C. when the Scyths encountered Philip of Macedon. During the same period, according to ancient writers, one of Alexander's generals led an unsuccessful campaign against the Scythians, and in 329-328 B.C. the Scythians sent an emissary to Macedonia.

The history of the Bosporan kingdom is better known. It was founded in the fifth century B.C. along the eastern and western shores of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, the straits connecting the Sea of Azov with the Black Sea. Its main city was Panticapaeum, the present-day Kerch. During the fourth century, trade between Greece and the Bosporan kingdom flourished: grain was supplied to Greece, while Greek works of art were imported in exchange. The famous Kul Oba kurgan, near Kerch, was the burial place of a member of the Bosporan nobility: in his tomb were found many rich objects of Greek workmanship, such as the famous gold bottle decorated

with Scythians (color plates 17, 18, cat. no. 81) and pendants decorated with the head of Athena, inspired by the statue in the Parthenon (color plate 16, cat. no. 78). A fifth-century Attic amphora found in Elizavetinskaya (to the west of Kerch) was a prize at the Panathenaic festival in Athens and may have been brought still containing the expensive olive oil it originally held (cat. no. 84). Magnificent Greek works depicting scenes from Scythian life are also found along the Dnieper. Superb examples include the gold comb from Solokha (color plates 12, 13, cat. no. 71) and the silver-gilt cup from Gaimanova Mogila (color plate 29, cat. no. 172). Scythian kurgans and settlements contain other types of Greek wares (including a great number of ceramics from various regions and colonies of Greece, as well as gold, silver, and copper coins), as well as objects imported from other ancient civilizations such as Achaemenid Iran and Egypt (color plate 10, cat. nos. 67, 62).

Between the fifth and third centuries B.C., the Scythians not only were in contact with the civilizations of Greece, Egypt, and the Near East, but shared a cultural unity with many other tribes living in the steppe region of eastern Europe and Asia. In art, an indication of such unity is the so-called animal style. Powerful, stylized, and decorative, this style is characteristic of a wide territory stretching from Hungary to China. It portrays animals and birds with their most important attribute—horns, paws, hooves, jaws, beaks, ears—exaggerated or accentuated. Predatory beasts and birds were important subjects, and the animals often appear locked in combat or in one of several characteristic poses: lying with legs folded under, curled into a circle, or running. These images probably had religious or magic significance: representations of strong, frightening, or speedy animals on the weapons or armor of a mounted warrior would

*One of the horses buried in Pazyryk,
wearing a reindeer mask*



be expected to increase his power and protect him from evil. Works in the animal style are often small, useful, and easily portable, and the most widely distributed objects are weapons and horse equipment, as might be expected of nomads' possessions. Spread over the vast expanse of the Eurasian steppes, they testify to the wide intertribal exchanges between Scythians and the other peoples of these lands.

The Culture of the Altai Mountains

6th-4th centuries B.C.

[*Catalogue nos. 100-142*]

A large group of objects in this exhibition comes from the extraordinary kurgans of the Altai mountains in Siberia. The kurgans, at Tuekta, Bashadar, and Pazyryk, were built between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. in mountainous regions difficult to reach. Immediately after the burials, water had seeped into the stone mounds and turned to ice; this permafrost has preserved some five thousand objects of wood, textiles, felt, leather, and fur.

The antiquities from the Altai kurgans at the Hermitage are particularly valuable since many are the most ancient examples of those arts and crafts for which time shows no mercy—an embroidered silk textile, a knotted rug, felt appliqué, and leather and wooden parts of horse equipment. All the kurgans had been robbed in antiquity, but the robbers only took objects made of precious metal, leaving the rest of the contents strewn about. The most important material comes from the Pazyryk excavations carried out in 1929 by M. P. Gryaz-

nov and S. I. Rudenko, and between 1947 and 1949 by Rudenko.

Under one mound at Pazyryk was a chamber lined with wooden logs, built in a trench about 164 feet square and from 13 to 23 feet deep. In the chamber was a sarcophagus hewn from a single log, decorated with scenes of animal combat. The body of the dead man had been embalmed, and on the skin of his arms, chest, and legs, tattoos of animals and fish can still be seen. The chieftain's wife or concubine had been buried with him, and in the grave had been placed clothing (cat. no. 125), ornaments, furniture, objects of everyday life, and musical instruments—everything that had surrounded him while he was alive; there was also a bronze cauldron filled with burnt hemp seeds, corroborating Herodotus' account of a Scythian custom (Book IV, 73-75).

Everything connected with the funerary procession and ritual had been placed in a trench near the outer wall of the chamber. In Pazyryk kurgan 5, near the north wall, were found bodies of richly caparisoned horses, a wooden chariot on large wheels, a felt wall hanging (part of the funerary tent) with two pictures of a seated woman holding a branch with a horseman before her, poles from the tent or chariot with felt swans as finials (color plate 25, cat. no. 118), a remarkable woolen rug, and other objects. The horses of the funerary procession were tall and slender, and of a different breed than the small local ones, known from common burials. They wore lavishly decorated saddles and bridles, with straps ornamented by a multitude of wooden plaques (often covered with gold or tin) depicting birds, animals, or mythical creatures, either sculptured or in relief. The saddles were also richly decorated, with ornaments made of varicolored pieces of felt or leather, and sometimes with important Iranian or Chinese textiles. Most of the scenes depict

animal combat, often mythical and close in style to those seen in Scythian art. Two steeds, who probably led the procession, were particularly outstanding: each wore an elaborate mask, one in the shape of a griffin's head, the other in the shape of the head of a reindeer with enormous antlers.

The Altai kurgans belonged to chieftains of rich tribes of herdsmen similar to the Scythians, who roamed over vast territories connecting the Far East with Europe. Their path preceded the later, more famous "silk route," which lay further south. It is no accident that works of art in the Altai kurgans bear witness to these people's

A Pazyryk kurgan



wide cultural connections: with the Far East, Central Asia, the Near East, and with the Scythian world. For instance, from kurgan 5 at Pazyryk comes a magnificent Chinese textile embroidered with birds sitting on branches or fluttering around, which had been made into a saddle blanket (color plate 23, cat. no. 117); fragments of other Chinese textiles have been found in other Pazyryk kurgans. The chariot with big wheels and covered seat is probably also Chinese: Rudenko suggests that it was a wedding chariot, brought by the Chinese bride of an Altai prince as part of her dowry. There is a woolen rug with nap, richly decorated with stylized birds' heads, fallow deer (known as "speckled stags"), floral patterns, and borders of horsemen. Although this rug cannot be positively identified as Iranian, some of the other textiles certainly are; these include fragments of woolen textiles with patterns similar to those on the clothing of Achaemenid warriors depicted on glazed tiles from Susa. Also Iranian are textile fragments with a row of striding lions (cat. no. 116), like those on the frieze of the processional road in Babylon near the Ishtar gate, and with women standing before incense-burning altars.

The Altai artisans were not simply borrowers, but were magnificent craftsmen in their own right: their carvers, for instance, created distinctive works in wood and bone that are remarkable for their realism, decorative quality, variety of compositions, and wealth of imagination. Especially beautiful is the pole top in the shape of a griffin holding a stag's head in its beak (cat. no. 126), and the miniature figure of a stag with spreading antlers is exquisite (cat. no. 127). These rich and interesting finds from the permafrost of the Altai kurgans remind us that excavations usually reveal only those few objects made of materials that can withstand the destructive actions of nature and of time.

The Culture of Siberia

6th–3rd centuries B.C.

[*Catalogue nos. 143–161*]

Thousands of ancient kurgans surrounded by tall vertical stones are a distinctive feature of the mountainous steppe landscape of the Minusinsk district of Siberia. Most of them were left by contemporaries of the Scythians, the tribes of the Tagar culture, named after the location of excavations on the Tagar lake and island, near Minusinsk.

Archaeological exploration has been going on in the Minusinsk region since the beginning of the eighteenth century. In 1722 D. G. Messerschmidt's expedition, commissioned by Peter I, carried out the earliest excavations of the kurgans on the Yenisei river and sent a number of objects to Peter's *Kunstammer*. Intensive collection and study has continued; important excavations were conducted in the 1920s.

The Tagar tribes lived during the seventh to third centuries B.C. in the Minusinsk basin on both shores of the Yenisei river, and spread northward to present-day Krasnoyarsk. Their occupations were herding, farming, hunting, and fishing. Favorable geographic conditions allowed their horses and long- and short-horned cattle to graze year-round, and on their territory structures to irrigate the fields and provide water for livestock have been found. The Tagar tribes also possessed a highly developed metallurgy, producing bronze knives, daggers, battle axes, mirrors, finials, horse equipment, and decorations. Their ceramics have a distinctive appearance: there are conical black polished jars, often with wide grooves along the upper edge, and various types of red clay vessels (cat. no. 147).

Characteristic of the Tagar period are tombs in the shape of earthen kurgans, with a four-sided enclosure of vertical slabs at the bottom. Tall stones stand at the corners of the enclosures, and often in the middle of their sides. The dead were buried in a stone box or log sarcophagus. Later in the Tagar period collective burial vaults occur, containing up to two hundred people who were buried over a number of years.

Tagar art is marked by the so-called Scytho-Siberian animal style. Their artists liked to represent horses, birds, mountain goats, wild boars, a feline predator, and stags; most often the animals are shown standing. Such representations appear on knife handles, dagger hilts, finials, battle hammers, clothing ornaments, and horse trappings. This art is monumental, decorative, and characterized by its peculiar, abbreviated stylization, which allows us to distinguish the work of Tagar artists from similar pieces from other regions. Although Scythian traits can be detected in the works of art and the weapons and armor, the Tagar tribes preserved their originality more than any others of the Scythian epoch, partly because they were a settled people, rather than nomadic, and because they lived in the deep Minusinsk basin, isolated from the rest of the world—surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the north by forest. These natural barriers prevented the mass penetration of other tribes into their territory, but did not interfere with their commerce with their neighbors. The peoples who developed the Tagar culture are the last large group of Europoid settlers in Eurasia.

Further east lived peoples of Mongoloid appearance, and in the cultures of these tribes of Transbaikalia and Mongolia there are many traces of so-called Scythian traits, especially evident in the art of the animal style.

The Sarmatian Culture

1st century B.C.–1st century A.D.
[*Catalogue nos. 162-165*]

Contemporary with the Scythians and, like them, mounted herdsmen, were the Sauromatae, who lived in the steppes around the Ural mountains and the Don and Volga rivers, and who seem to link the Scythian world with that of the Sakas of Central Asia. In the third century B.C. the Sarmatians developed from this ancient culture, and by the second and first centuries B.C. they had conquered much of Scythia as well as the towns along the north shores of the Black Sea. Later, in the third and fourth centuries A.D., the Sarmatians were driven out by other nomadic tribes, such as the Huns.

This exhibition includes several Sarmatian objects from the "Novercherkassk Treasure" (cat. nos. 163-164), which were discovered by accident in the 1860s. These elaborate works are remarkable for their striking decorative effect and complicated compositions involving fantastic animals; many are encrusted with colored stones, glass, and pearls. Also in the show is a bracelet found in 1954 in a kurgan in the Volga region (cat. no. 162), which reflects a complex version of the animal style.

The most important goal of this exhibition is to present magnificent examples of ancient art: the sumptuous masterpieces made by and for the Scythians, and examples of the dramatic art from the ice-bound Altai tombs. The other material illustrates the relationship of these peoples with contemporary cultures and with cultures that preceded and followed them, and shows how the far-ranging contacts between the tribes of the first millennium B.C. carried this handsome, powerful art over the vast expanse of the steppes.