Scythians

"Scythian" redirects here. For members of the wider cultures of which the Scythians were a part, see Scytho-Siberian world. For other uses, see Scythian (disambiguation).

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Scythians

Skuda (earlier)[1][2]

Skula (later)[1]

c. 9th-8th century BC–c. 3rd century BC

The maximum extent of the Scythian kingdom in West Asia

The maximum extent of the Scythian kingdom in West Asia

The maximum extent of the Scythian kingdom in the Pontic steppe

The maximum extent of the Scythian kingdom in the Pontic steppe

Location Central Asia (9th-7th centuries BC)

West Asia (7th–6th centuries BC)

Pontic Steppe (6th–3rd centuries BC)

Capital Kamianka (c. 6th century BC - c. 200 BC)

Common languages Scythian

Akkadian (in West Asia)

Median (in West Asia)

Phrygian (in West Asia)

Urartian (in West Asia)

Thracian (in Pontic Steppe)

Ancient Greek (in Pontic Steppe)

Proto-Slavic language (in Pontic Steppe)

Maeotian (in Pontic Steppe)

Religion Scythian religion

Ancient Mesopotamian religion (in West Asia)

Urartian religion (in West Asia)

Phrygian religion (in West Asia)

Ancient Iranic religion (in West Asia)

Thracian religion (in Pontic Steppe)

Ancient Greek religion (in Pontic Steppe)

Demonym(s) Scythians

Government Monarchy

King

• unknown-679 BC

Išpakaia

• 679-c. 665 BC

Bartatua

• c. 658/9-625 BC

Madyes

• c. 610 BC

Spargapeithes

• c. 600 BC

Lykos

• c. 575 BC

Gnouros

• c. 550 BC

Saulios

• c. 530-c. 510 BC

Idanthyrsus

• c. 490-c. 460 BC

Ariapeithes

• c. 460-c. 450 BC

Scyles

• c. 450-c. 430 BC

Octamasadas

• c. 360s-339 BC

Ateas

• c. 310 BC

Agaros

Dependency of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (from c. 672 to c. 625 BC)

Historical era Iron Age:

Scytho-Siberian world (earlier)

Scythian culture (later)

• Scythian migration from Central Asia to Caucasian Steppe

c. 9th-8th century BC

• Scythian alliance with the Neo-Assyrian Empire

c. 672 BC

• Scythian conquest of Media

c. 652 BC

• Scythian defeat of Cimmerians

c. 630s BC

• Median revolt against Scythians

c. 625 BC

• Scythian raid in Levant till Egypt

c. 620 BC

• Medo-Babylonian conquest of the Assyrian Empire

c. 614-612 BC

• Expulsion of Scythians from West Asia by Medes

c. 600 BC

• Persian invasion

513 BC

• War with Macedonia

340-339 BC

• Celtic, Getic, and Germanic invasion of Scythia

c. 4th century BC

• Sarmatian invasion of Scythia

c. 3rd century BC

Preceded by Succeeded by

Cimmerians

Agathyrsi

Urartu

Mannai

Andronovo culture

Median Empire

Lydian Empire

Scythian kingdom in Crimea

Scythian kingdom on the lower Danube

Sindica

Sarmatians

Kingdom of Pontus

Today part of Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Romania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Iran

Scythians is located in Continental AsiaSAKASSCYTHIANSPazyryk

cultureKhotanUyuk

cultureTagar

cultureMassagetaeKangjuSubeshi

cultureOrdos

cultureSargat

cultureTasmola

cultureSauromatiansDahaeIndo-

ScythiansWestern

SatrapsNorthern

Satraps

Map of the Scythian (

) and Saka realms (

) and their main polities throughout their history.[3][4][5][6] The affiliation of the southeastern-most Subeshi culture and Ordos culture remains uncertain.

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The Scythians (/ˈsɪθiən/ or /ˈsɪðiən/) or Scyths (/ˈsɪθ/, but note Scytho- (/ˈsaɪθʊ/) in composition) and sometimes also referred to as the Pontic Scythians,[7][8] were an ancient Eastern Iranic equestrian nomadic people who had migrated during the 9th to 8th centuries BC from Central Asia to the Pontic Steppe in modern-day Ukraine and Southern Russia, where they remained established from the 7th century BC until the 3rd century BC.

Skilled in mounted warfare, the Scythians replaced the Agathyrsi and the Cimmerians as the dominant power on the western Eurasian Steppe in the 8th century BC. In the 7th century BC, the Scythians crossed the Caucasus Mountains and frequently raided West Asia along with the Cimmerians.

After being expelled from West Asia by the Medes, the Scythians retreated back into the Pontic Steppe in the 6th century BC, and were later conquered by the Sarmatians in the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC. By the 3rd century AD, last remnants of the Scythians were overwhelmed by the Goths, and by the early Middle Ages, the Scythians were assimilated and absorbed by the various successive populations who had moved into the Pontic Steppe.

After the Scythians' disappearance, authors of the ancient, mediaeval, and early modern periods used their name to refer to various populations of the steppes unrelated to them.

Names

Main article: Names of the Scythians

Etymology

The name is derived from the Scythian endonym Skuda, meaning lit. 'archers'[9][2] which was derived from the Proto-Indo-European root skewd-, itself meaning lit. 'shooter, archer'.[10] This name was semantically similar to the endonym of the Sauromatians, \*Saᵘrumata, meaning "armed with throwing darts and arrows."[2]

From this earlier term Skuda was derived:[11][12][13]

the Akkadian designation of the Scythians:

Askuzāya (𒇽𒊍𒆪𒍝𒀀𒀀[14][15]

Ašguzāya (𒇽𒀾𒄖𒍝𒀀𒀀[14][15]);

Asguzāya (𒇽𒊍𒄖𒍝𒀀𒀀[14][15]);

or Iškuzāya (𒇽𒅖𒆪𒍝𒀀𒀀[16])

as well as the Ancient Greek name Skuthai (Σκυθαι), from which was derived the Latin name Scythae, which gave the English name Scythians.[17]

The Urartian name for the Scythians might have been Išqigulu (𒆳𒅖𒆥𒄖𒇻[18][19]).[20]

Due to a sound change from /δ/ (/ð/) to /l/ commonly attested in East Iranic language family to which Scythian belonged, the name Skuδa evolved into Skula, which was recorded in ancient Greek as Skōlotoi (Σκωλοτοι), in which the Greek plural-forming suffix -τοι was added to the name.[21][1]

The name of the 5th century BC king Scyles (Ancient Greek: Σκυλης, romanized: Skulēs) represented this later form, Skula.[11][12]

Modern terminology

See also: Scytho-Siberian world

Scythians proper

The name "Scythians" was initially used by ancient authors to designate specifically the Iranic people who lived in the Pontic Steppe between the Danube and the Don rivers.[22][23][24][25]

In modern archaeology, the term "Scythians" is used in its original narrow sense as a name strictly for the Iranic people who lived in the Pontic and Crimean Steppes, between the Danube and Don rivers, from the 7th to 3rd centuries BC.[26]

Broader designations

By the Hellenistic period, authors such as Hecataeus of Miletus however sometimes extended the designation "Scythians" indiscriminately to all steppe nomads and forest steppe populations living in Europe and Asia, and used it to also designate the Saka of Central Asia.[27]

Early modern scholars tended to follow the lead of the Hellenistic authors in extending the name "Scythians" into a general catch-all term for the various equestrian warrior-nomadic cultures of the Iron Age-period Eurasian Steppe following the discovery in the 1930s in the eastern parts of the Eurasian steppe of items forming the "Scythian triad," consisting of distinctive weapons, horse harnesses, and objects decorated in the "Animal Style" art, which had until then been considered to be markers of the Scythians proper.[28]

This broad use of the term "Scythian" has however been criticised for lumping together various heterogeneous populations belonging to different cultures,[29] and therefore leading to several errors in the coverage of the various warrior-nomadic cultures of the Iron Age-period Eurasian Steppe. Therefore, the narrow use of the term "Scythian" as denoting specifically the people who dominated the Pontic Steppe between the 7th and 3rd centuries BC is preferred by Scythologists such as Askold Ivantchik.[17]

Within this broad use, the Scythians proper who lived in the Pontic Steppes are sometimes referred to as Pontic Scythians.[7][30]

Modern-day anthropologists instead prefer using the term "Scytho-Siberians" to denote this larger cultural grouping of nomadic peoples living in the Eurasian steppe and forest steppe extending from Central Europe to the limits of the Chinese Zhou Empire, and of which the Pontic Scythians proper were only one section.[31] These various peoples shared the use of the "Scythian triad," that is of distinctive weapons, horse harnesses and the "Animal Style" art.[32]

The term "Scytho-Siberian" has itself in turn also been criticised since it is sometimes used broadly to include all Iron Age equestrian nomads, including those who were not part of any Scythian or Saka.[33] The scholars Nicola Di Cosmo and Andrzej Rozwadowski instead prefer the use of the term "Early Nomadic" for the broad designation of the Iron Age horse-riding nomads.[34][35]

Saka

While the ancient Persians used the name Saka to designate all the steppe nomads[36][37] and specifically referred to the Pontic Scythians as Sakā tayaiy paradraya (𐎿𐎣𐎠 𐏐 𐎫𐎹𐎡𐎹 𐏐 𐎱𐎼𐎭𐎼𐎹; lit. 'the Saka who dwell beyond the (Black) Sea'),[38] the name "Saka" is used in modern scholarship to designate the Iranic pastoralist nomads who lived in the steppes of Central Asia and East Turkestan in the 1st millennium BC.[23][29]

Cimmerians

The Late Babylonian scribes of the Achaemenid Empire used the name "Cimmerians" to designate all the nomad peoples of the steppe, including the Scythians and Saka.[39][36][40]

However, while the Cimmerians were an Iranic people[41] sharing a common language, origins and culture with the Scythians[42] and are archaeologically indistinguishable from the Scythians, all sources contemporary to their activities clearly distinguished the Cimmerians and the Scythians as being two separate political entities.[43]

The 5th-century BC Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus is the most important literary source on the origins of the Scythians

History

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There are two main sources of information on the historical Scythians:[44]

Akkadian cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia which deal with early Scythian history from 7th century BC;

and Graeco-Roman sources which cover all of Scythian history, most prominently those written by Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which are less reliable because the information they contain is mixed with folk tales and learnt constructs of historians.[45]

Pre-Scythian period

The arrival of the Scythians in Europe was part of the larger process of westwards movement of Central Asian Iranic nomads towards Southeast and Central Europe which lasted from the 1st millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD, and to which also participated other Iranic nomads such as the Cimmerians, Sauromatians, and Sarmatians.[46][47][48]

Beginning of steppe nomadism

The formation of genuine nomadic pastoralism itself happened in the early 1st millennium BC due to climatic changes which caused the environment in the Central Asian and Siberian steppes to become cooler and drier than before.[49] These changes caused the sedentary mixed farmers of the Bronze Age to become nomadic pastoralists, so that by the 9th century BC all the steppe settlements of the sedentary Bronze Age populations had disappeared,[50] and therefore led to the development of population mobility and the formation of warrior units necessary to protect herds and take over new areas.[51]

These climatic conditions in turn caused the nomadic groups to become transhumant pastoralists constantly moving their herds from one pasture to another in the steppe,[50] and to search for better pastures to the west, in Ciscaucasia and the forest steppe regions of western Eurasia.[49]

The Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex

The first wave[52] of nomadic populations who originated in the parts of Central Asia corresponding to eastern Kazakhstan or the Altai-Sayan region,[53] had, beginning in the 10th century BC and lasting until the 9th to 8th centuries BC,[54] migrated westwards into the Pontic-Caspian and Pannonian Steppe regions, where they formed new tribal confederations which constituted the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex, among whom were the Agathyrsi in the Pontic Steppe, as well as the Cimmerians in the Caspian Steppe,[55][47][56] and possibly the Sigynnae in the Pannonian Steppe.[57] The achaeological and historical records regarding these migrations are however scarce, and permit to sketch only a very broad outline of this complex development.

The Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex developed natively in the North Pontic region during the 9th to mid-7th centuries BC from elements which had earlier arrived from Central Asia, due to which it itself exhibited similarities with the other early nomadic cultures of the Eurasian steppe and forest steppe which existed before the 7th century BC, such as the Aržan culture, so that these pre-Scythian early nomadic cultures were part of a unified Aržan-Chernogorovka cultural layer originating from Central Asia.[58]

Proto-Scythian period

Aržan kurgan (8-7th century BC)

Some of the earliest Scythian artefacts in Animal style, Aržan kurgan, Southern Siberia, dated to 8-7th century BC.

Curled-up feline animal from Aržan-1, circa 800 BC.[59]

Like the nomads of the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex, the Scythians originated, along with the Early Sakas, in Central Asia and Siberia[60][61] in the steppes corresponding to either present-day eastern Kazakhstan or the Altai-Sayan region, which is attested by the continuity of Scythian burial rites and weaponry types with the Karasuk culture, as well as by the origin of the typically Scythian Animal Style art in the Mongolo-Siberian region.[62]

Therefore, the Scythians and the nomads of the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex were closely related populations who shared a common origin, culture, and language,[42] and the earliest Scythians were therefore part of a common Aržan-Chernogorovka cultural layer originating from Central Asia, with the early Scythian culture being materially indistinguishable from the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex.[63]

Going further back, these various steppe nomads shared a common Central Asian origin with the other Iranic peoples such as the Medes, Persians, Parthians, and Sogdians. These various Iranic peoples still shared significant commonalities in terms of language and culture which were visible in how they shared common myths as well as dress and ornament styles until at least the 5th century BC.[64][65][66]

The Scythians were already acquainted with quality goldsmithing and sophisticated bronze-casting at this time, as attested by gold pieces found in the 8th century BC Aržan-1 kurgan.[67][68] Arrowheads from the 1st kurgan of the Aržan burials also suggest that the typical "Scythian-type" socketed arrows made of copper alloy might have originated during this period.[69][70]

Migration out of Central Asia

The second wave of migration of Iranic nomads corresponded to the early Scythians' arrival from Central Asia into the Caucasian Steppe,[71][72][73] which begun in the 9th century BC,[74] when a significant movement of the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian Steppe started after the early Scythians were expelled out of Central Asia by either the Massagetae, who were a powerful nomadic Iranic tribe from Central Asia closely related to them,[75] or by another Central Asian people called the Issedones,[76][77] forcing the early Scythians to the west, across the Araxes river and into the Caspian and Ciscaucasian Steppes.[78]

This western migration of the early Scythians lasted through the middle 8th century BC,[79] and archaeologically corresponded to the westward movement of a population originating from Tuva in southern Siberia in the late 9th century BC, and arriving in the 8th to 7th centuries BC into Europe, especially into Ciscaucasia, which it reached some time between c. 750 and c. 700 BC,[72][80] thus following the same migration general path as the first wave of Iranic nomads of the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex.[73]

Displacement of the Cimmerians

The Scythians' westward migration brought them to the Caspian Steppe,[81] in the lands of the Cimmerians,[82] who had themselves originated in the first westward wave of proto-Scythian migrations[47] of nomadic populations who had arrived from Central Asia[55] into the Pontic-Caspian Steppe regions during the 10th century BC.[47]

The Cimmerians at this time were leaving their homelands in the Caspian Steppe to move into West Asia:[55] the Cimmerians might have migrated under the pressure from the Scythians,[83] although sources are lacking for any such pressure on the Cimmerians by the Scythians or of any conflict between these two peoples at this early period.[84] Moreover, the arrival of the Scythians in West Asia about 40 years after the Cimmerians did so suggests there is no available evidence to the later Graeco-Roman account that it was under pressure from Scythians migrating into their territories that the Cimmerians crossed the Caucasus and moved south into West Asia.[85][86]

The remnants of the Cimmerians in the Caspian Steppe were assimilated by the Scythians,[87] with this absorption of the Cimmerians by the Scythians being facilitated by their similar ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles,[88] thus transferring the dominance of this region from the Cimmerians to the Scythians who were assimilating them,[89][47] after which the Scythians settled in the Ciscaucasian Steppe where were located the their kingdom's headquarters,[90] between the Araxes river to the east, the Caucasus Mountains to the south, and the Maeotian Sea to the west.[91][72]

The arrival of the Scythians and their establishment in this region in the 7th century BC[42] corresponded to a disturbance of the development of the Cimmerian peoples' Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex,[72] which was thus replaced through a continuous process[63] over the course of c. 750 to c. 600 BC in southern Europe by the early Scythian culture which nevertheless still showed links to the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex.[92][17] Some aspects of the Scythian culture, such as elements of funerary rituals, ceramics, horse gear, and some weapon types, also showed links to the older Timber Grave culture which had existed in the north Pontic region in the Bronze Age.[87]

Early (or Archaic) Scythian period

Ciscaucasian kingdom

After their initial westwards migrations, and beginning around c. 750 BC,[93][94] the Scythians settled in the Ciscaucasian Steppe between the Araxes river to the east, the Caucasus mountains to the south, and the Maeotian Sea to the west,[95] and were especially concentrated in the valley of the Kuban river,[96] where would be located their kingdom's headquarters until the end of the 7th century BC:[97][90][98] the Scythians who first arrived into Ciscaucasia did not consist of large numbers of people and they lived in a small area.[99] During these early phases of Scythian history, Ciscaucasia was where the nomadic state and the culture of the Scythians developed,[100] and it would remain the centre of the Scythian kingdom until around c. 600 BC.[101]

Several Scythian royal burials from the 7th century BC, such as those of Krasnoye Znamya at Stavropol, Kelermesskaya, Ulsky Aul, and Kostromskaya Stanitsa, date from this period[102][90] and constitute evidence of the existence of a wealthy Scythian aristocracy living in Ciscaucasia at this time.[103][96] These upper class burials exhibited significant differences from commoner burials, implying the existence of important levels of social stratification among the population of the early Scythian kingdom.[104]

In Ciscaucasia, the Scythians came into contact with a heterogeneous group of agrarian Maeotian tribes whom they subjugated,[99] after which they dominated the Maeotians thanks to their mobility and their military units which they needed to conquer new areas and protect their herds.[51][29] There was significant social differentiation between the Scythians and their native subjects, especially the Maeotians, with the Scythian ruling class being buried in lavishly-equipped kurgans, while the Maeotians were buried in poorly furnished flat cemeteries.[105]

Since the Scythians needed agricultural and craft products from the native populations, they conquered these peoples and established interdependence systems: the Scythians obtained surplus through collecting tribute from the populations of the native Koban and Maeotian cultures of Ciscaucasia,[99] who provided various goods to the Scythians, such as agricultural products and crafted goods like clay and bronze vessels, various weapons, bridles, and horse harness equipment;[106] the Maeotian craftsmen especially made large wide-necked pots, jugs, mugs, and small basins for Scythian customers.[107]

These interactions between the Scythians and Maeotians deepened through the 8th to 7th centuries BC so that it led to the creation of a mixed culture,[108] and some of the local tribes were assimilated into the Scythians and therefore contributed to the growth of the Scythian population.[109] Significant exchanges between the Scythians and the native inhabitants of the Caucasus region also occurred during this period:

the Scythian culture adopted many elements of the native Ciscaucaucasian cultures,[110][72] so that the interaction with the various Maeotian tribes contributed significantly to the cultural development of the Scythians;[51]

the Ciscaucasian peoples were also significantly influenced by the Scythians, so that the burials of the Koban and Colchian cultures contained Scythian-type weapons and horse equipment.

This earliest phase of Scythian culture, called "pre-Kelermes" because they pre-date the Kelermes kurgans containing West Asian objects, formed in the Ciscaucasian Steppe over the course ofc. 750 to c. 700 BC.[111] The early Scythian culture thus completed its formation under the partial influence of the native Ciscaucasian cultures, and, to a smaller degree, of the civilisation of West Asia,[17] resulting in Scythian art from Ciscaucasia displaying influences from the Koban culture.[112] The Scythians would especially use helmets of Ciscaucasian origin until the 6th century BC.[113]

Arrival in West Asia

Cimmerian migration into West Asia

During the second half of the 8th century BC and the 7th century BC, the equestrian steppe nomads from Ciscaucasia expanded to the south into West Asia,[114][84] beginning with the Cimmerians, who did so[85][115][55] by crossing the Caucasus Mountains[116][85][55] through the Alagir, Darial, and Klukhor [ru] Passes,[117] after which they eventually became active in Transcaucasia, the Iranian Plateau and Anatolia.[114]

Reasons for southwards nomad expansion

The involvement of the steppe nomads in West Asia happened in the context of the then growth of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which under its kings Sargon II and Sennacherib had expanded from its core region of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to rule and dominate a large territory ranging from Que (Plain Cilicia) and the Central and Eastern Anatolian mountains in the north to the Syrian Desert in the south, and from the Taurus Mountains and North Syria and the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Iranian Plateau in the east.[118][119]

Surrounding the Neo-Assyrian Empire were several smaller polities:[120][119]

in Anatolia to the northwest, were the kingdoms of:

Phrygia, with its capital at Gordion, held hegemony over Central and Midwest Anatolia and parts of Cilicia;

and Lydia;

Babylon, conquered several times by the Assyrians, in the south;

Egypt in the southwest;

Elam, whose capital was Susa, in the southeast of West Asia and the southwest of the Iranian plateau, where they were the main power, with their ruling classes being divided into pro-Assyrian and pro-Babylonian factions;

and to the immediate north laid the powerful kingdom of Urartu (centred around Ṭušpa), which had established several installations including a system of fortresses and provincial centres over regional communities in eastern Anatolia and the northwest Iranian Plateau, was contesting its southern borderlands with the Neo-Assyrian Empire;

in the eastern mountains were several weaker polities:

Ellipi;

Mannai;

the city-states of the Medes, who were an Iranic people of West Asia to whom the Scythians and Cimmerians were distantly related.

Beyond the territories under the direct Assyrian rule, especially in its frontiers in Anatolia and the Iranian Plateau, were local rulers who negotiated for their own interests by vacillating between the various rival great powers.[118]

This state of permanent social disruption caused by the rivalries of the great powers of West Asia proved to be a very attractive source of opportunities and wealth for the steppe nomads;[121][122] and, as the populations of the nomads of the Ciscaucasian Steppe continued to grow, their aristocrats would lead their followers southwards across the Caucasus Mountains in search of adventure and plunder in the volatile status quo then prevailing in West Asia,[96] not unlike the later Ossetian tradition of the ritual plunder called the balc (балц),[123][13] with the occasional raids eventually leading to longer expeditions, in turn leading to groups of nomads choosing to remain in West Asia in search of opportunities as mercenaries or freebooters.[124]

Thus, the Scythians and Cimmerians became active in West Asia in the 7th century BC,[87] where they would vacillate between supporting either the Neo-Assyrian Empire or other local powers, and serve these as mercenaries, depending on what they considered to be in their interests.[121][125][126] Their activities would over the course of the late-8th to late-7th centuries BC disrupt the balance of power which had prevailed between the states of Elam, Mannai, the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Urartu on one side and the mountaineer and tribal peoples on the other, eventually leading to significant geopolitical changes in this region.[127][128]

Nevertheless, a 9th or 8th century BC kurgan from Paphlagonia belonging to a warrior, and containing typical steppe nomad equipment, suggests that nomadic warriors had already been arriving in West Asia since the 9th century BC.[43][119] Such burials imply that some small groups of steppe nomads from Ciscaucasia might have acted as mercenaries, adventurers and settler groups in West Asia, which laid the ground for the later large scale movement of the Cimmerians and Scythians there.[43]

There appears to have been very little direct connection between the Cimmerians' migration into West Asia and the Scythians' later expansion into this same region.[94] Thus, the arrival of the Scythians in West Asia about 40 years after the Cimmerians did so suggests there is no available evidence to the later Graeco-Roman account that it was under pressure from the Scythians migrating into their territories that the Cimmerians crossed the Caucasus and moved south into West Asia.[85][86][84]

Scythian expansion into West Asia

After having settled into Ciscaucasia, the Scythians became the second wave of steppe nomads to expand southwards from there, following the western shore of the Caspian Sea[129] and bypassing the Caucasus Mountains to the east through the Caspian Gates[130] similarly to how the Sarmatians, Alans and Huns would later invade the Arsacid Parthian and Sasanid Persian empires,[85] with the Scythians first arriving in Transcaucasia around c. 700 BC,[131] after which they consequently became active in West Asia.[132] This Scythian expansion into West Asia, nonetheless, never lost contact with the core Scythian kingdom located in the Ciscaucasian Steppe and was merely an extension of it, as was the concurrently occurring westward Scythian expansion into the Pontic Steppe.[17]

Gold Scythian belt title, Mingəçevir (ancient Scythian kingdom), Azerbaijan, 7th-4th century BC[133][134]

Once they had finally crossed into West Asia, the Scythians settled in eastern Transcaucasia and the northwest Iranian plateau,[135] between the middle course of the Cyrus and Araxes rivers before expanding into the regions corresponding to present-day Gəncə, Mingəçevir and the Muğan plain[36] in the steppes of what is presently Azerbaijan, which became their centre operations until c. 600 BC,[136][110] and this part of Transcaucasia settled by the Scythians consequently became known in the Akkadian sources from Mesopotamia as the "land of the Scythians" (𒆳𒅖𒆪𒍝𒀀𒀀, māt Iškuzaya) after them.[137] The neighbours of the Scythians in Transcaucasia at this time were Urartu, Mannai,[137] and the Medes.[138][139]

Archaeologically, the Scythian movement into Transcaucasia is attested in the form of an expansion of their archaeological culture to the south till the northern foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, and then from Ciscaucasia southwards further to the south along the western coast of the Caspian Sea into Transcaucasia and the Iranian Plateau.[140][80]

Unlike the Cimmerians, who by then were splitting into a western group which had moved into Anatolia and an eastern group which was migrating into the Iranian Plateau, the Scythians in West Asia remained organised into a single polity centred in Transcaucasia and the northwest Iranian plateau.[110][120]

Once the Scythians had expanded into Transcaucasia, craftsmen from this region also became their suppliers, so that both Ciscaucasian and Transcaucasian workshops were producing bronze vessels with zoomorphic handles, various types of bowls decorated with stamped and engraved signs, and cast and riveted bronze cauldrons for Scythian customers.[107]

Arrival in the Pontic Steppe

From their base in the Ciscaucasian Steppe,[90] the Scythians during the 8th to 7th centuries BC conquered the Pontic and Crimean Steppes[141] to the north of the Black Sea[90] up to the Istros river, whose mouth henceforth formed the southwestern boundary of Scythian territory,[142] while the Eastern Carpathian Mountains blocked their advance to the west,[143] so that the Scythian kingdom's limits before its expansion into West Asia were the Carpathian Mountains in the west and the Caucasus Mountains in the south.[144] This initial Scythian population who settled in the Pontic Steppe in the 8th and 7th centuries BC was nevertheless small while the bulk of the Scythian population remained in the Ciscaucasian Steppe.[98]

Displacement of the Agathyrsi

The migration of the Scythians into the Pontic Steppe affected the steppe and forest steppe areas of South-West Europe and pushed several other populations of the region towards more remote regions.[72]

Among the many populations displaced by the Scythian expansion were the Agathyrsi,[72] who were another nomadic Iranic people who also originated in the same first wave of Central Asian nomads to have migrated into the western steppes as the Cimmerians, and therefore belonged to same the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex as the Cimmerians,[47] thus making the Agathyrsi the oldest of the Scythian-related Iranic populations to have dominated the Pontic Steppe.[145]

The incoming migration of the Scythians from the east pushed the Agathyrsi westwards, out of the Pontic Steppe, with the Scythians themselves replacing them as the main population of this region,[145][146] thus completing the process of the Scythians becoming the main dominant population of the Pontic Steppe[79] over the course of c. 650 to c. 600 BC.[87] The Agathyrsi henceforth became the immediate neighbours of the Scythians to their west and the relations between these two tribes remained hostile.[145]

Early Scythian-type remains found in Central Europe, especially on the Thracian and Pannonian plains,[74] correspond partly to the Agathyrsi[97][147] and to other smaller groups who were also displaced from the Pontic Steppe into the region of the Carpathians.[74]

Activities in Europe

Raids into Central Europe

Using the Pontic Steppe as their base, from around c. 700 BC the Scythians often raided into Central and Southeast Europe, due to which weapons and horse-equipment originating from the steppes started appearing around c. 700 BC in Central Europe.[90]

Relations with the forest steppe

To the north of the Pontic Steppe was the East European forest steppe, which was divided into several separate zones by the large rivers which flowed southwards across it into the Black Sea. This forest steppe region was inhabited by several different native cultural groups, with the tribes further north being outside the range of Scythian influence.[98]

The forest steppe tribes to the south meanwhile had since been the Bronze Age been organised into large mixed farming communities who had close links with the Scythians and traded with them, leading to the ruling classes of these forest tribes copying Scythian burial styles;[50][148] during the 7th century BC, these forest steppe mixed farmers were coming under Scythian influence, due to which their daily lives began to resemble to some extent that of the militaristic nomadic lifestyle of the Scythians.[97] Nevertheless, much of these forest steppe peoples' cultures continued many of their early local traits, especially regarding commoner burial traditions, pottery, and local decorations, meaning that they remained distinct from the culture of the nomadic Scythians.[149]

Beginning in the 7th century BC itself, the Scythians initiated a long period of military conflict by attempting to impose their rule over the forest steppe tribes, in response to which these latter peoples built large numbers of fortified settlements to repel these attacks.[97][150]

Presence in West Asia

During the 7th century BC, the Scythians were present in both Cis- and Trauscaucasia:[151] to the south of the Caucasus Mountains, the Scythians, along with the Cimmerians, became embroiled in the developments of West Asia,[152] and their activities would soon range from Transcaucasia to further south in Media.[17]

Throughout the 7th century BC, it was from West Asia that the most important outside influences would arrive into the culture of the Scythians settled in Ciscaucasia,[153][150] which consequently evolved into a "post-Kelermes" Scythian culture over the course of c. 700 to c. 650 BC.[111] The Scythian and Cimmerian movements into Anatolia and the Iranian Plateau would act as catalysts for the adoption of Eurasian nomadic military and equestrian equipments by various West Asian states:[125] it was during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE that "Scythian-type" socketed arrowheads and sigmoid bows ideal for use by mounted warriors, which were the most advanced shooting weapon of their time and were both technically and ballistically superior to native West Asian archery equipment, were adopted throughout West Asia.[154]

Cimmerian and Scythian trading posts and settlements on the borders of the various West Asian states at this time also supplied them with goods such as animal husbandry products, not unlike the trade relations which existed the mediaeval period between the eastern steppe nomads and the Chinese Tang Empire.[155]

The Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon

With the Cimmerian victory on Urartu and Sargon II's successful campaign there, both in 714 BC, having eliminated Urartu as a threat against the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Mannai had ceased being useful as a buffer zone for Neo-Assyrian power, while the Mannaeans started seeing the Neo-Assyrian imperial demands as an unneeded burden. Therefore, the Mannaean king Aḫšeri (r. c. 675 – c. 650 BC) welcomed the Cimmerians and the Scythians as useful allies who could offer both protection and favourable new opportunities to Mannai, which in turn allowed him to become an opponent of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, with him subsequently remaining an enemy of Sennacherib and his successors Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.[156]

During the period corresponding to the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (r. 681 – 669 BC), the Scythians were active only on the western Iranian Plateau,[137] especially in Mannai and Media,[157][139] with their first ever recorded mention being from the Neo-Assyrian records[87][158] of c. 680 BC, which detail the first Scythian activities in West Asia and refer to the first recorded Scythian king, Išpakāya, as an ally of the Mannaians.[159]

Around this time, Aḫšēri was hindering operations by the Neo-Assyrian Empire between its own territory and Mannai,[160] while the Scythians were recorded by the Neo-Assyrians along with the eastern Cimmerians, Mannaeans and Urartians as possibly menacing communication between the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its vassal of Ḫubuškia, with messengers travelling between the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Ḫubuškia being at risk of being captured by hostile Cimmerian, Mannaean, Scythian or Urartian forces.[161] Neo-Assyrian records also referred to joint Cimmerian-Scythian forces, along with the Medes and Mannaeans, as a possible threat against the collection of tribute from Media.[162]

During these attacks, the Scythians, along with the eastern Cimmerians who were located on the border of Mannai,[163][80] were able to reach far beyond the core territories of the Iranian Plateau and attack the Neo-Assyrian provinces of Parsuwaš and Bīt-Ḫambān and even until as far as Yašuḫ, Šamaš-naṣir and Zamuā in the valley of the Diyala river.[164] One Scytho-Cimmerian attack which had invaded Ḫubuškia from Mannai was even able to threaten the core Neo-Assyrian territories by passing through Anisus and Ḫarrāniya on the Lower Zab river and sack the small city of Milqiya near Arbaʾil, close to the capital cities of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, where they destroyed the Bīt-Akītī (House of the New Year Festival) of this city, which later had to be rebuilt by Esarhaddon.[165][166] These attacks into their heartlands shocked the Assyrians, who sought to know if they were to face more such invasions through divination.[160]

Meanwhile, Mannai, which had been able to grow in power under Aḫšēri, possibly because it adapted and incorporated steppe nomad fighting technologies borrowed from its Cimmerian and Scythian allies,[167] was able to capture the territories including the fortresses of Šarru-iqbi and Dūr-Illil from the Neo-Assyrian Empire and retain them until the c. 650s BC.[168][156]

The Urartian king Rusa II (r. 680 – 639 BC) carried out major fortification construction projects around Lake Van, such as at Rusāipatari, and at Teišebaini near what is presently Yerevan,[169] all intended to monitor the activities of the allied forces of the Scythians, Mannaians and Medes; other fortifications built by Rusa II were Qale Bordjy and Qale Sangar north of Lake Urmia, as well as the fortresses of Pir Chavush, Qale Gavur and Qiz Qale around the administrative centre of Haftavan Tepe to the northwest of the Lake.[170]

These allied forces of the Cimmerians, Mannaeans and Scythians were defeated some time between c. 680 and c. 677 BC by Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon (r. 681 – 669 BC), who had succeeded him as the king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire[171][172][17] and carried out a retaliatory campaign which reached deep into Median territory until Mount Bikni and the country of Patušarra (Patischoria) on the limits of the Great Salt Desert.[173][174] Išpakāya was killed in battle against Esarhaddon's forces during this campaign, and he was succeeded as king of the Scythians by Bartatua,[175] with whom Esarhaddon might have immediately initiated negotiations.[176]

Since the Cimmerians had left their Ciscausian homelands and moved into West Asia to seek plunder, they had no interest in the local affairs of the West Asian states and therefore fought for the highest bidder: therefore Esarhaddon took advantage of this and, at some point before c. 675 BC, he started secret negotiations with the eastern Cimmerians, who confirmed to the Assyrians that they would remain neutral and promised not to interfere when Esarhaddon invaded Mannai again in c. 675 BC. Nonetheless, since the Cimmerians were distant foreigners with a very different culture, and therefore did not fear the Mesopotamian gods, Esarhaddon's diviner and advisor Bēl-ušēzib referred to these eastern Cimmerians instead of the Scythians as possible allies of the Mannaeans and advised Esarhaddon to spy on both them and the Mannaeans.[128][177][178]

This second Assyrian invasion of Mannai however met little success because the Cimmerians with whom Esarhaddon had negotiated had deceived him by accepting his offer only to attack his invasion force,[178] and the relations between Mannai and the Neo-Assyrian Empire remained hostile while the Cimmerians remained allied to Mannai[179] until the period lasting from 671 to 657 BC.[180] As a result of this failure, the Neo-Assyrian Empire resigned itself to waiting until the Cimmerians were no longer a threat before mounting any further expedition in Mannai.[178]

From c. 674 to c. 672 BC, the eastern Cimmerians were allied with the Medes, who had rebelled against the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and with the Scythians. During these years, the Assyrian holdings in Ellipi and Paršua were constantly under threat of attack by the Cimmerians.[80][181]

Alliance with the Neo-Assyrian Empire

The Neo-Assyrian Empire under Esarhaddon saw the then Kushite-ruled Egypt as its main military concern, and therefore chose to avoid spending resources on the other imperial borders by securing good relations with Tabal, Elam, Urartu, and the Median city-states.[125]

Furthermore, the Neo-Assyrian Empire did not remain on a defensive footing in response to the activities of the allied Cimmerian, Mannaean and Scythian forces, and it soon undertook diplomatic initiatives to separate Aḫšeri from his allies: it is in this context that the Esarhaddon had opened negotiations with Išpakāya's successor Bartatua to form friendly ties with the Scythians, and that he accepted when,[182] by 672 BC, Bartatua had asked for the hand of the eldest daughter of Esarhaddon, the Neo-Assyrian princess Šērūʾa-ēṭirat, and promised to form an alliance treaty with the Neo-Assyrian Empire in an act of careful diplomacy.[183]

The marriage between Bartatua and the Šērūʾa-ēṭirat likely took place:[184] Bartatua's marriage to Šērūʾa-ēṭirat required that he would pledge allegiance to Assyria as a vassal, and in accordance to Assyrian law, the territories ruled by him would be his fief granted by the Assyrian king, which made the Scythian presence in West Asia a nominal extension of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Bartatua himself an Assyrian viceroy.[185][186] Under this arrangement, the Scythians became one of the main political and military forces in West Asia,[158][47] where their strength heavily depended on their cooperation with the Assyrian Empire: henceforth, the Scythian kingdom remained a Neo-Assyrian ally.[187]

The result of this marriage[17] was that the Scythians ceased to be referred to as an enemy force in the Neo-Assyrian records[188] and the alliance between the Scythian kingdom and the Neo-Assyrian Empire was concluded,[189][190][17] following which the Scythian kingdom remained on friendly terms with the Neo-Assyrian Empire and maintained peaceful relations with it.[191]

Unions between Scythians and West Asians were not limited to royalty, and the appearance of jewellery decorated using granulation and filigree in the core Ciscaucasian territory of the Scythian kingdom attests that Scythian men married or took as concubines West Asian women who followed them back to Ciscaucasia.[96]

Scythian troops appear to also have served in the Urartian army at this time, with the burial of a Scythian lord together with his horses under a Urartian building at Norşuntepe suggesting that Scythian troops were guarding the western border of Urartu under the reign of Rusa II.[192] The earliest presence of silk West Asia was found in a Urartian fortress, presumably imported from China through the intermediary of the Scythians, implying that the trade of silk to western Eurasia might have started at this time through the intermediary of the Scythians during their stay in West Asia.[193]

The eastern Cimmerians meanwhile remained hostile to Assyria,[194] and, along with the Medes, were the allies of Ellipi against an invasion by the Neo-Assyrian Empire between c. 672 and c. 669 BC.[195] The eastern Cimmerians attacked the Assyrian province of Šubria in alliance with Urartu during this time.[80]

And when the Median ruler Kaštaritu rebelled against the Neo-Assyrian Empire and founded the first independent kingdom of the Medes after successfully liberating them from Neo-Assyrian overlordship in c. 671 to c. 669 BC,[196] the eastern Cimmerians were allied to him.[197]

West Asian influences on the Scythians

The marital alliance between the Scythian king and the Assyrian ruling dynasty, as well as the proximity of the Scythians with the Assyrian-influenced states of Mannai and Urartu, thus placed the Scythians under the strong influence of Assyrian culture,[110][186] and contact with West Asian civilisation was the most important outside influence in the formation of Scythian culture and society throughout the 7th century BC:[82][17][150]

Scythian culture and art took their definitive form to serve the interests of the Scythian aristocracy which was establishing its hegemony in West Asia over the course of c. 650 to c. 600 BC,[198] when it absorbed various West Asian elements;[97] Scythian dress and armour from this time, as well as the artefacts, motifs, style and technique of the grave goods used in the kurgans of the Scythian kingdom's core territory in Ciscaucasia, all reflect heavy influences from West Asia and the Iranian Plateau on Scythian culture during this period.[199]

Under West Asian influence, Scythian rulers started emulating the West Asian kings of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Urartu and Media, and they began using luxury goods as status markers:[102][109][99] the Scythians especially profited significantly in this regards from their activities in West Asia, where they obtained spoil acquired as diplomatic presents or as plunder, and which they used to enhance their status back in their kingdom's core territory in the Ciscaucasian Steppe.[96] The Assyrian- and Urartian-made grave goods in the Ciscaucasian Scythian kurgans thus reflected the introduction of cultural elements from West Asia in the south.[200]

Thus, during this period, large amounts of goods, especially luxury items were flowing from West Asia into the Scythian core territories in the steppe,[96] having been made by West Asian craftsmen for Scythian patrons,[201] and attesting of the Caucasus Mountains' role as a porous boundary through which the Scythians could obtain desirable goods from the peoples of West Asia.[64] Examples of these goods include a sword scabbard, an axe overlay, a pair of gold cups, a silver mirror, all of West Asian origin and found in one of the Kelermes kurgans and the Melhuniv [uk] kurgan, as well as Assyrian-made jewellery, such as coiled earrings, diadems decorated with rosettes and other objects decorated with stamping, granulation and filigree.[202][17]

In addition to the imported West Asian luxury goods, concepts also flowed northwards from West Asia into the Ciscaucasian Steppe, where they went on to enhance the artistic range of the craftsmen serving the Scythian aristocracy:[203] the Scythians had absorbed West Asian tastes and customs,[204] such as the concept of the divine origin of royal power,[205] and as their material culture was absorbing West Asian elements, so was their art absorbing West Asian artistic modes of representing these,[102][97] which is visible in how some of the luxury goods available to the Scythian aristocrats combined native Scythian motifs with West Asian ones, such as through the mingling of West Asian-style and nomadic beasts and depictions of the Tree of Life on Scythian gold sword sheaths.[17][206]

These luxury goods were made by West Asian craftsmen for Scythian rulers,[17] with the gold overlays of the two swords and the axe from Kelermes and Melhuniv implying that the Scythians were then under strong Urartian artistic influence or that Urartian craftsmen were producing metalwork for Scythian patrons.[151] Scythian chariot parts, ritual horse attire, bowls, stolls, clothing elements, personal jewellery such as diadems and earrings, especially, were borrowed from West Asians through the intermediary of West Asian craftsmen,[99] who might have accompanied the Scythians back into their Ciscaucasian core territory, where their skills were highly prized.[206]

It was also only when the Scythians expanded into West Asia that they became acquainted with iron smelting and forging, before which they were still a Bronze Age society until the late 8th century BC.[207] Some West Asian blacksmiths might have accompanied the Scythians during their northwards retreat and become employed by Scythian kings.[207] The Scythians also borrowed the use of the war chariots[107] and of scale armour from West Asians,[113][208] and Scythian warriors themselves obtained iron weapons and military experience during their stay in West Asia.[209]

The Scythian Snake-Legged Goddess and other artifacts, from Kul-Oba.

Assyrian- and Urartian-style horse equipment found in Scythian kurgans of this time also attests of the importation of West Asian horses in Ciscaucasia during the period of Scythian presence in West Asia.[96]

Within the Scythian religion, the goddess Artimpasa and the Snake-Legged Goddess were significantly influenced by the Mesopotamian and Syro-Canaanite religions, and respectively absorbed elements from ʿAštart-Ištar-Aphrodite for Artimpasa and from ʿAttarʿattā-Derketō for the Snake-Legged Goddess.[210] Scythian chariot parts from this period were decorated with images of the goddess Ištar stylised like those from Neo-Assyrian reliefs.[99]

Reflecting West Asian influences on Scythian religion, a fire temple was built near the first Krasnoye Znamya kurgan according to the rules of Median fire temples, suggesting that Median builders might have moved to Ciscaucasia to build it.[99]

The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal

Conquest of Mannai

Some time in the late 660s or early 650s BC, the eastern Cimmerians left the Iranian Plateau and retreated westwards into Anatolia to join the western Cimmerians operating there.[211]

Although Mannai had been powerful under its king Aḫšeri, this power had depended on his alliance with the Cimmerians and Scythians to protect his kingdom from attacks by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and their departure therefore provided Esarhaddon's son and successor to the Neo-Assyrian throne, Ashurbanipal (r. 669 – 631 BC), with the opportunity to carry out a campaign against Mannai over the course of 660 to 659 BC and recover some of the settlements which the Mannaeans had previously captured.[212]

Aḫšeri tried in vain to stop the Neo-Assyrian advance, but he was otherwise able to withstand the Neo-Assyrian invasion. Aḫšeri had also depended on the Cimmerians to suppress internal opposition to his rule, and their absence weakened him enough that he was soon was overthrown by a popular rebellion and killed along with most of his dynasty by a peasant revolt. Aḫšeri's surviving son, Uallî, requested help from Ashurbanipal, which was provided through the intermediary of Ashurbanipal's brother-in-law, the Scythian king Bartatua,[213] who annexed Mannai into the Scythian kingdom[214][190] while Uallî repressed the rebellion before ascending to the throne of Mannai and submitting to the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[215] Despite this defeat, Mannai remained a significant power until the rise of the Median Empire in the late 7th century BC.[167]

Following the Scythian conquest of Mannai, the centre of Scythian power in West Asia shifted to the region of the Lake Urmia,[216][217] between the Caspian Sea and the Zagros Mountains in the northwest of the Iranian Plateau, where the fertile pastures around the lake allowed the Scythians to rear the large herds of horses that they depended on.[218] Henceforth, the site corresponding to present-day Saqqez became the political centre of the Scythians in West Asia.[186]

The reign of Madyes

Bartatua was succeeded by his son with Šērūʾa-ēṭirat,[186] Madyes,[219] who remained an ally of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[125]

Conquest of Media

In 652 BC, Esarhaddon's eldest son, Šamaš-šuma-ukin, who had succeeded him as king of Babylon, rebelled against his younger brother Ashurbanipal:[220] it took Ashurbanipal four years to fully suppress the Babylonian rebellion by 648 BC, and another year to destroy the power of Elam, who had supported Šamaš-šuma-ukin,[167] and, although Ashurbanipal would nevertheless be able to maintain control over Babylonia for the rest of his reign, the Neo-Assyrian Empire finally emerged from this crisis severely worn out.[221]

By 625 BC, the Medes had acquired knowledge of new ideologies and military technologies both from the sedentary powers like the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Urartu, and from the steppe nomads like the Cimmerians and the Scythians.[222] Thanks to the Median integration of these influences, the Median king Phraortes had been able to combine Scythian and Neo-Assyrian military practices and create an organised army composed of distinct divisions of spearmen, archers, and cavalry, thus transforming Media into the dominant power of the Iranian Plateau.[222]

When the revolt of Babylon broke out, Phraortes supported Šamaš-šuma-ukin, and Madyes helped Ashurbanipal repress the revolt externally[223][224][125] by invading the Medes and imposing Scythian hegemony on Media.[225]

Under Scythian rule, the Medes adopted more Scythian weaponry and military tactics, especially in the domain of archery, and they also adopted mounted cavalry as the main form of cavalry warfare.[226][227][228]

Scythian hegemony in West Asia

The Scythian conquest of Media itself, in turn, marked the beginning of a nearly 30-year long period of Scythian hegemony in West Asia[229] which Graeco-Roman authors later called the "Scythian rule over Upper Asia,"[230] and during which the Scythian kingdom held hegemony not only in Trauscaucasia and Mannai, but would soon extend their rule to Urartu and Anatolia as well,[231] with the various states in these regions, such as Mannai, Urartu and Media, continuing to exist under the suzerainty of the Scythian kingdom and having to pay tribute to it.[232]

Defeat of the Cimmerians

An Assyrian relief depicting Cimmerian mounted warriors

Cimmerian activities in Anatolia

During the 7th century BC, the bulk of the Cimmerians were operating in Anatolia,[233] where they controlled a large territory[234] bordering Lydia in the west, covering Phrygia, and reaching Cilicia and the borders of Urartu in the east.[235][236][237]

The disturbances experienced by the Neo-Assyrian Empire as result of the activities of the Cimmerians in Anatolia led to many of the rulers of this region to try to break away from Neo-Assyrian overlordship,[216] so that the Cimmerians had effectively ended Neo-Assyrian control in Anatolia by the time that Esarhaddon had been succeeded as king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire by Ashurbanipal.[238] By 657 BC, Neo-Assyrian records were referring to a Cimmerian threat against the western possessions of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the province of Que or even part of the Levant.[239]

In 657 BC itself, the Assyrian divinatory records were calling the Cimmerian king Dugdammî (the Lygdamis of the Greek authors) by the title of šar-kiššati (lit. 'King of the Universe'),[236][167] which in the Mesopotamian worldview could belong to the King of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and had been usurped by the Cimmerians and needed to be won back by the Neo-Assyrian Empire[240] This situation remained unchanged throughout the rest of the 650s and the early 640s BC.[241]

Cimmerian alliance with the Treres

Around the c. 660s BCE, the Thracian tribe of the Treres migrated across the Thracian Bosporus and invaded Anatolia from the north-west,[233] after which they allied with the Cimmerians,[80] and, from around the c. 650s BC, the Cimmerians were nomadising in Anatolia along with the Treres.[242][243]

Cimmerian attack on Lydia and Asian Greece

Lycian charioteer warriors

In 644 BC, the Cimmerians and Treres under the Cimmerian king Dugdammî and the Treran king Kōbos,[244] and in alliance with the Lycians or Lycaonians, attacked Lydia for a second time in 644 BC:[245] this time they defeated the Lydians and captured their capital city of Sardis except for its citadel, and the Lydian king Gyges died during this attack.[246]

After sacking Sardis, Lydgamis and Kobos led the Cimmerians and the Treres into invading the Greek city-states of the Troad,[247][80] Aeolia and Ionia on the western coast of Anatolia,[248] where they destroyed the city of Magnesia on the Meander as well as the Artemision of Ephesus.[249]

Cimmerian activities in Cilicia

Sensing the exhaustion of Neo-Assyrian power following the suppression of the revolt of Šamaš-šuma-ukin, the Cimmerians moved to Cilicia on the north-west border of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in c. 640 BC itself, immediately after their third invasion of Lydia and the attack on the Asian Greek cities. There, Dugdammî allied with the then rebellious Assyrian vassal state of Tabal, Mussi, to attack the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[250]

However, Mussi died before the planned attack on Neo-Assyrian Empire, while Dugdammî carried it out but failed because, according to Neo-Assyrian sources, fire broke out in his camp.[251] Following this, Dugdammî was faced with a revolt against himself, after which ended his hostilities against the Neo-Assyrian Empire and sent tribute to Ashurbanipal to form an alliance with him, while Ashurbanipal forced Dugdammi to swear an oath to not attack the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[244][252]

Death of Dugdammî

Dugdammî soon broke his oath and attacked the Neo-Assyrian Empire again, but during his military campaign he contracted a grave illness whose symptoms included paralysis of half of his body and vomiting of blood as well as gangrene of the genitals, and he consequently committed suicide in 640 BC[253] in Ḫilakku itself.[254]

Dugdammî was succeeded as king of the western Cimmerians in Ḫilakku by his son Sandakšatru,[255] who continued Dugdammî's attacks against the Neo-Assyrian Empire[256] but failed just like his father.[247][257]

Decline of the Cimmerians

The power of the Cimmerians dwindled quickly after the death of Dugdammî,[258] although the Lydian kings Ardys and Sadyattes might however have either died fighting the Cimmerians or were deposed for being incapable of efficiently fighting them, respectively in c. 637 and c. 635 BC.[259]

Rise of the Lydian Empire

A relief depicting mounted Lydian warriors on slab of marble from a tomb

Despite these setbacks, the Lydian kingdom was able to grow in power, and the Lydians themselves appear to have adopted Cimmerian military practices such as the use of mounted cavalry, with the Lydians fighting using long spears and archers, both on horseback.[260]

Around c. 635 BC,[261] and with Neo-Assyrian approval,[262] the Scythians under Madyes conquered Urartu,[214][263] entered Central Anatolia[127] and defeated the Cimmerians and Treres.[264] This final defeat of the Cimmerians was carried out by the joint forces of Madyes's Scythians, whom Strabo of Amasia credits with expelling the Treres from Asia Minor, and of the Lydians led by their king Alyattes,[265] who was himself the son of Sadyattes as well as the grandson of Ardys and the great-grandson of Gyges, whom Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Polyaenus of Bithynia claim permanently defeated the Cimmerians so that they no longer constituted a threat.[266]

In Polyaenus' account of the defeat of the Cimmerians, he claimed that Alyattes used "war dogs" to expel them from Asia Minor, with the term "war dogs" being a Greek folkloric reinterpretation of young Scythian warriors who, following the Indo-European passage rite of the [[Kóryos|kóryos]], would ritually take on the role of wolf- or dog-warriors.[267]

The Cimmerians completely disappeared from history following this final defeat,[247][17] and they were soon assimilated by the populations of Anatolia.[242] It was also around this time that the last still-existing Syro-Hittite and Aramaean states in Anatolia, which had been either independent or vassals of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Phrygia, Urartu, or the Cimmerians, also finally disappeared, although the exact circumstances of their end are still very uncertain.[221]

Scythian power in West Asia thus reached its peak under Madyes, with the West Asian territories ruled by the Scythian kingdom extending from the Halys river in Anatolia in the west to the Caspian Sea and the eastern borders of Media in the east, and from Transcaucasia in the north to the northern borders of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the south.[268] And, following the defeat of the Cimmerians and the disappearance of the other Anatolian states, it was the new Lydian Empire of Alyattes which became the dominant power of Anatolia.[233]

Archaeologically, the movement of the Cimmerians and Scythians into Anatolia corresponds to the expansion of the Scythian culture into this region.[80]

It was also at this time that the Scythians first came into contact with the Greeks, in Anatolia.[42][17][269]

First wave of Greek colonisation

The ancient Greeks had first been making expeditions in the Black Sea in the 8th century BC, and encounters with friendly native populations quickly stimulated trade relations and the development of more regular commercial transits, which in turn led to the formation of trading settlements.[270][271]

After the Greek city-states in the Aegean Sea begun to experience social tensions caused by the growth of their populations and the Cimmerian invasions of Ionia in the middle of the 7th century BC, the shores of the Black Sea became a propitious destination to establish settlements[272][122][273] since its coasts provided safe ports, defendable locations, and plenty of fish in the seas, estuaries and rivers.[274] Furthermore, the local population in the North Pontic region was already producing a surplus of goods such as grain, which facilitated the peaceful formation of relations with the local peoples and the early development of trade with the peoples of the forest steppe.[275]

The main agent for the Greek colonisation of the shores of the Black Sea was the city of Miletus from Ionia in western Anatolia, who was responsible for founding around 90 colonies,[276][277] and other cities of Ionia, such as Samos and Chios, were also important participants of this process.[278]

Thus, soon after, around c. 625 BC, the Scythians in the Pontic Steppe came into contact with Greek settlers[17] from Miletus[279] who were starting to found their first colonies in the areas under Scythian rule on the northern coast of the Black Sea.[279][17] This process of colonisation put the Scythians' nomadic world of the steppes into permanent contact with the urban one of the Aegean Greeks for the rest of their history.[17]

First Greek trade outposts

The first wave of Greek colonisation of the north coast of the Black Sea consisted of attempts to develop trade with its native populations,[277] and therefore involved the formation of trading enclaves (Ancient Greek: εμπορια, romanized: emporia; Latin: emporia)[280] which had to be set up at locations providing safe approach and good docking facilities, as well as granting access to the major rivers of the steppe through which the inland regions of the forest steppe could be reached;[277] these rivers were important in their role as the routes through which various goods could be shipped to the south to the Greek colonies.[281] The native populations and the colonists saw this process, intended to establish trade connections in places which already had a sparse population rather than to obtain land, as mutually beneficial, hence why it was largely peaceful.[274]

Therefore, the earliest emporia of the north Black Sea were built at Histria on the mouth of the Istros river, at Tyras on a promontory commanding the estuary of the Tyras river,[277] and especially on the island of Borysthenēs, near the joint estuary of the Hypanis and Borysthenēs rivers and therefore granting access to both of them.[282] The emporion of Borysthenēs would henceforth thrive during the rest of the 7th century BC, and throughout the following 6th century BC.[277]

These emporia were themselves useful for the commercial ventures of their mother cities by acting as markets through which oil, wine and manufactured goods could be exchanged with the native populations in exchange for foodstuffs and rare raw materials such as grain, fish, animal products, metals, forest products, furs, and slaves brought through the inland trading networks.[201][274][276] The success of this trade, as a result, reinforced itself into a way for the Greek colonies we well as their home cities to increase their power and wealth.[274]

Decline in West Asia

By the mid-620s BC, the Neo-Assyrian Empire began unravelling after the death of Ashurbanipal:[283][17] in addition to internal instability within Assyrian itself due to civil wars under his successors Aššur-etil-ilāni (r. 631 – 627 BC) and Sîn-šar-iškun (r. 627 – 612 BC),[260] Babylon also revolted against the Assyrians in 626 BC under the leadership of Nabopolassar,[284][191] and the Assyrian general Sîn-šumu-līšir also rebelled against Sîn-šar-iškun in 626 BC.[284]

Revolt of Media

The Median king Cyaxares

By then, the Median king Cyaxares had grown powerful and started negotiations with the Scythians. The next year, in 625 BC, he invited the Scythian leaders at a feast in his palace, where he made them drunk and by assassinated them all, thus overthrowing the Assyro-Scythian yoke over the Medes and making them one of the first people to acquire independence from the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[285]

The assassination of the Scythian rulers by Cyaxares brought an end to the hegemony of the Scythian kingdom in West Asia,[286] after which its activities became limited to the eastern borderlands of the Neo-Assyrian Empire[17] and the importation of West Asian goods into the Scythian kingdom's core territories of the Ciscaucasian steppe ended.[17]

The Medes at this time had acquired knowledge of new ideologies and military technologies both from the sedentary powers like the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Urartu, and from the steppe nomads like the Cimmerians and the Scythians:[222] it was, weapons and military tactics, particularly in archery.[287][288]) Thanks to the Median integration of these influences, Cyaxares was able to combine Scythian and Neo-Assyrian military practices and create an organised army composed of distinct divisions of spearmen, archers, and cavalry, thus transforming Media into the dominant power of the Iranian Plateau again like Phraortes had done before.[289][222]

Following the successful revolts of Babylonia under Nabopolassar and Media under Cyaxares, the various vassals of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in Anatolia and on the Iranian Plateau started breaking away from Neo-Assyrian rule.[222]

Raid into the Levant

The pharaoh Psamtik I

With the power of their former Neo-Assyrian allies crumbling during the mid-620s BC, and the newly ascending Neo-Babylonian and Median empires having not yet consolidated themselves, the Scythians took advantage of the power vacuum to raid into the Levant[290] some time between c. 626 and c. 616 BC.[291][292] It is unknown whether this raid damaged the hold of the Neo-Assyrian Empire on its western provinces,[293] although the last known Neo-Assyrian presence in Phoenicia dates from around this time, in the form of the mention of the governor of Ṣumur, Mannu-kī-aḫḫē, in a list of eponyms from c. 619 BC.[294]

The Scythian raid into the Levant reached as far south as Palestine,[190] and was foretold by the Judahite prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zephaniah, who foretold of a pending "Disaster from the North" which they believed would result in the destruction of Jerusalem.[295] However, the Scythian raid did not affect Jerusalem or even the kingdom of Judah,[296] which caused Jeremiah to lose favour with the Judahite king Josiah, who instead turned to the prophetess Huldah for counsel, and led to Jeremiah temporarily stopping prophesying for some years.[297]

The Scythian raid reached the borders of the Saite Egyptian kingdom,[298] where their advance was stopped by the marshes of the Nile Delta,[296] after which the pharaoh Psamtik I met them and convinced them to turn back by offering them gifts.[299]

The Scythians sacked several cities in Palestine while retreating,[17] including the temple of the goddess ʿAštart in Ascalon.[300] According to later Graeco-Roman authors, this the shrine of Ascalon was considered to be the most ancient of all temples to that goddess, as a result of which the perpetrators of this sacrilege and their descendants were allegedly cursed by ʿAštart with a "female disease" causing them to become a class of transvestite diviners called the Anarya (lit. 'unmanly' in Scythian[17]).[301]

War against the Neo-Assyrian Empire

Having reorganised his kingdom and grown his military power, Cyaxares attacked the Neo-Assyrian Empire;[302][303] meanwhile, Nabopolassar had managed to take control of all Babylonia by 620 BC,[302] and by 616 BC he was militarily comfortable enough to attack the Assyrian core territories;[260] and Nabopolassar and Cyaxares soon allied with each other against the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[260]

By 615, the Scythian kingdom was operating as an ally of Cyaxares in his war against the Neo-Assyrian Empire, possibly out of necessity, with the Scythians' abandonment of their former alliance with the Assyrians to instead side with the Neo-Babylonians and the Medes being a critical factor in worsening the military position of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[304][187][190] The Scythian kingdom supported the Medo-Babylonian conquests of Aššur in 614 BC, of Nineveh in 612 BC, and of the last Neo-Assyrian remnants at Ḫarran in 610 BC, which permanently destroyed the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[305]

The presence of Scythian-style arrowheads at locations where the Neo-Babylonian Empire is known to have conducted military campaigns, and which are associated with the destruction layers of these campaigns, suggests that certain contingents composed of Scythians or of Medes who had adopted Scythian archery techniques might have recruited by the Neo-Babylonian army during this war.[306] The Neo-Babylonian archery divisions themselves were influenced Scythian archery techniques because Scythian bows were more powerful than Akkadian ones.[307]

Clay figurines depicting Scythian riders, as well as an Ionian shield and a Neo-Hittite battle-axe similar to those found in Scythian remains in the Pontic steppe, suggest that both the contingents as well as actual Scythian mercenaries had also participated at the final Neo-Babylonian victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish.[306][70]

The Scythian or Scythian-style contingents also participated in the Neo-Babylonian campaigns in the southern Levant, including in the Babylonian annexation of the kingdom of Judah in 586 BC.[306]

Beginning of Graeco-Scythian commercial activities

From the Greek settlements on the Black Sea coast, the Scythian aristocracy especially bought luxury goods which they used flauntingly during their lives and in their tombs as status markers: wine and the various Greek vessels used to mix and drink it were especially imported in large quantities and were even used as grave goods, while craftsmen in the Greek colonies manufactured items made of gold or electrum for Scythian patrons.[308]

Once Scythian activities begun to decline in West Asia in the c. 620s BC and ties between the Scythians and the Greek colonies started developing concurrently, the Scythians started buying Greek pottery imported from the Aegean islands,[309] and a new thriving source of trade for the Scythian kingdom was created in the north shore of the Black Sea.[64] Thus ended the importation into the Scythian kingdom's core territories of the Ciscaucasian steppe of West Asian goods, which were replaced by goods bought from the Greek colonies or commissioned from Greek craftsmen by Scythian patrons over the course of c. 625 to c. 600 BC,[310][17] thus resulting in Greek influences on the Scythians replacing West Asian ones from the beginning of the 6th century BC.[153]

The relations between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek colonies of the northern Pontic region therefore remained initially largely peaceful, thanks to which the Greek cities possessed no defensive walls.[17]

Expulsion from West Asia

By the c. 590s BC, the ascending Median Empire of Cyaxares annexed Urartu,[311][312] after having already annexed Mannai in 616 BC.[289] This rise of Median power forced the Scythian kingdom to leave West Asia and retreat northward into the Ciscaucasian Steppe,[313] after which the Scythian activities in West Asia,[158][38][17] as well as the ties between West Asians and the Scythians over the course of the 7th century BC,[314] and West Asian influences on the Scythians, all came to an end around c. 610-600 BC.[315]

Nevertheless, even after the Scythians' retreat from West Asia, complex relations continued to exist between the Median and Scythian kingdoms located, respectively, to the south and north of the Caucasus Mountains, with the Scythians continuing to be involved as partners and enemies of the Median kingdom in the Caucasian region.[316]

Remnants in West Asia

Some splinter Scythian groups nevertheless remained in eastern Transcaucasia, especially in the area corresponding to modern-day Azerbaijan, and did not retreat to the north.[82] Therefore, the area where they lived was called Sakašayana (lit. 'land inhabited by the Saka (that is, by Scythians)') by the Medes; this name was later recorded as Sakasēnē (Σακασηνη) by Ptolemy, and its inhabitants were called the Skythēnoi (Σκυθηνοι) by Xenophon, as Sakesinai (Σακεσιναι) by Arrian, and as the Sacassānī by Titus Livius.[36]

These Scythians served in the army of Cyaxares,[237] where they participated in the Median conquest of Urartu,[221] and it was one such Scythian division was responsible for the capture and destruction of the fortresses of Argištiḫinili and Teišebaini in northern Urartu.[317] The Median kingdom might also have employed Scythians as hunters to provide the court with game.[227]

Hostilities eventually broke out between Cyaxares and some of these Scythians serving him, likely as a result of the Median kingdom ending the autonomy of these Scythians and fully annexing them.[318] Later Graeco-Roman sources claimed that these Scythians left the Median kingdom and fled into the Lydian Empire, beginning a conflict between Lydia and Media:[227] in the first two decades of the 6th century BC, the Median westwards expansion from the Iranian Plateau and the Lydian eastwards expansion from Anatolia came to blows, resulting in a war which lasted from c. 590 and ended only due to a solar eclipse in 585 BC, after which peace was made between Lydia and Media and a new political order was established in West Asia.[319][320]

These Scythians who had remained in West Asia had been completely assimilated into Median society and state by the mid-6th century BC so that they no longer constituted an independent group and no longer had a separate identity of their own.[321][322]

North Pontic Scythian kingdom

The Scythian kingdom in the Pontic steppe at its maximum extent in the 6th century BC

The Scythian kingdom in the Pontic steppe at its maximum extent in the 6th century BC

After their expulsion from West Asia, the majority of the Scythians returned to the parts of the Ciscaucasian Steppe[323] corresponding to present-day Stavropol and the Kuban river valley[102][324] before moving into the Pontic Steppe,[325] which only then started being occupied by the Scythians in bulk and on a large scale,[98] resulting in the Pontic Steppe becoming the centre of Scythian power.[47] Among the Scythians who had still remained in Ciscaucasia, the influence of the native populations of this region became more prominent during this period.[326]

This movement of the Scythians into the Pontic Steppe was motivated by two main factors:[64]

to the south of the Caucasus was the powerful but hostile Median Empire, which compromised the security of the Scythian realm in Ciscaucasia;

the Greek colonies on the shores of the Black Sea to the south and the mixed farmers of the forest steppe to the north essential source of trade for the Scythians, thus being a place from where they could obtain significant wealth.

The Scythian settlement in the Pontic Steppe had thus placed them in an extremely advantageous position:[98]

to the north, in the forest steppe, lived large settled mixed farmer populations who produced a large variety of highly sought-after commodities such as iron, charcoal, furs, honey, slaves, and grain;

to the south, on the north shore of the Black Sea, were the Greek colonies which were seeking raw materials and manpower for their own use, as well as to export to Greece.

This situation therefore allowed the Scythian kingdom to mediate the thriving trade that the Greek colonies to their south were carrying out with the sedentary peoples of the forest steppe to their north,[17][98] and which was carried out via the large rivers of the Scythian steppe flowing southwards into the Black Sea and formed the main access routes to these northern markets.[17] The relations between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek traders were therefore mutually beneficial and influenced both the nomadic Scythians and the forest steppe populations, with the Scythian aristocracy profiting significantly from this trade.[327][328]

The Pontic Steppe was therefore a particularly attractive territory for the Scythians to occupy, not only because it was an ideal terrain for their warrior pastoralist lifestyle, but also because it allowed them to obtain grain to supplement their diet from the mixed farmer population of the forest steppe to their north, and exotic luxury goods for their aristocracy to use as status markers from the Greek colonies on the shore of the Black Sea.[94]

Attesting of this Scythian movement out of Ciscaucasia and into the Pontic Steppe, as well as of their deepening of the connections with the Greek colonies, Ciscaucasian helmets ceased to be used by the Scythians in the 6th century BC, and were replaced by Greek ones, especially of the Attic type,[113] while the female burial of the 2nd Kelermes kurgan contained an Ionian Greek silver gilt mirror made in the 7th to 6th centuries BC.[329]

Pontic Scythian political and social formation

Within the Pontic Steppe, the incoming Iranic Scythians settled in the eastern steppe regions on the western and eastern banks of the Hypanis and Borysthenēs rivers and immediately to the north of the Maeotian Sea eastwards until the Tanais river, while in the western parts of the Scythian kingdom lived several Thracian[330] and Proto-Slavic[331] sedentary tribes:[332] the arriving Scythian conquerors established themselves as the ruling elite, known as the Royal Scythians,[37] over the local population and assimilated them into a single tribal identity while allowing them to continue their various lifestyles and economic organisations.[333]

Thus, in many parts of the north Pontic region under their rule, the Scythians established themselves as a ruling class over already present sedentary Thracian populations in the western regions:[330] some of the Scythian tribes intermarried with the already present sedentary Thracian populations to form new tribes such as the Nomadic Scythians and the Alazones, composed of a Thracian populace with an Iranic ruling class.[334] The Royal Scythians' ability to dominate these sedentary populations was itself derived from their nomadic military methods which they had first developed in Ciscaucasia.[51] Therefore, many of the ethnically non-Scythian populations of the Pontic Steppe became designated by the term "Scythians" largely because they lived under the domination of the Scythians proper,[22][40] after whom the Pontic Steppe also became known as Scythia.[335]

During this early phase of the Pontic Scythian kingdom, the Royal Scythians settled in the region immediately to the west of the Tanais river,[336] with their hold on the western part of the steppe located to the west of the Borysthenēs being light, and they were largely satisfied with tribute they levied from the sedentary agriculturist populations of this region.[337]

In the Tauric Chersonese, where lived the Tauri, the Royal Scythians conquered the members of this population living in the foothills and the steppes, thus gaining control of mist of the peninsula and forming a mixed Scythi-Taurian population. Due to this mingling with the Scythians, the sites of the Taurian Kizil-Koba culture in the foothill steppes were different from those in the Tauric Mountains who remained independent of the Scythians.[338] During the 6th century BC, the Scythians were few in number in the Tauric Chersonese, and, because they led a nomadic life, their population on the peninsula increased only during the seasonal migrations.[339]

From the 7th to 5th centuries BC, the Scythian kingdom was a pre-state tribal class society constituted of tribes headed by their own lords, with the king being the main tribal lord of the dominant tribe of the incoming Iranic Scythians, known as the Royal Scythians, and all the other tribes within the Scythian kingdom being subject to the Royal Scythians, to whose king and warrior aristocracy they had to provide servants to.[340]

The metallurgical workshops which produced the weapons and horse harnesses of the Scythians during the Early Scythian period were located in the forest steppe,[341] with the centre of industry at that time being located in the region of the Tiasmyn group of the Scythian culture, which corresponded the country of the Arotēres, where an Iranic Scythian elite ruled over a sedentary Thracian population.[342]

During this early phase of their northern Pontic kingdom, in the 6th to 5th centuries BC, the Scythian royalty would bury their dead in two main regions:[102][17][343]

in Ciscaucasia in the Kuban region inhabited by the Maeotians, where the royal and aristocratic tombs were the most lavish of all Scythian funerary monuments of the Early Scythian period, and included the kurgans of Kelermesskaya, Ulsky Aul, and Kostromskaya Stanitsa. The burials in these kurgans consisted either of rectangular or square pits covered with wood, or of wooden or stone vaults built on the ground surface, in which the deceased were laid out in supine position, accompanied by riding horses, as well as draught horses accompanied by chariots and several objects of West Asian origin;[102][17]

in the forest steppe, where the tombs were built using a slightly different rite than the Ciscaucasian ones: they consisted of pits covered with wood or wooden vaults built on the ground surface or let into pits, with the vaults having occasionally been burnt before being covered by the earthen mound. Of these, the most important was the Melhuniv kurgan, which contained grave goods of West Asian origin comparable to those of the Ciscaucasian tombs.[17]

Only a very small number, about 20, of Scythian tombs from the 6th to 5th centuries BC were in the Pontic Steppe:[344][102][90] these burial patterns followed a custom whereby the Scythian royalty buried their dead at the edges of their territory[17] so as to mark the boundaries of their kingdom.[345]

Scythian influence in the Pontic Steppe

The westward migration of the Scythians was accompanied by the introduction into the north Pontic region of articles originating in the Siberian Karasuk culture, such as distinctive swords and daggers, and which were characteristic of Early Scythian archaeological culture, consisting of cast bronze cauldrons, daggers, swords, and horse harnesses,[346][151] which had themselves been influenced by Chinese art, with, for example, the "cruciform tubes" used to fix strap-crossings being of types which had initially been modelled by Shang artisans.[347]

It was at this time[347] that the Scythians brought the knowledge of working iron which they had acquired in West Asia with them and introduced it into the Pontic Steppe, whose peoples were still Bronze Age societies until then.[207] Some West Asian blacksmiths might also have accompanied the Scythians during their nortwards retreat and become employed by Scythian kings, after which the practice of ironworking soon spread to the neighbouring populations.[207]

The Scythian establishment in the Pontic Steppe, and therefore their subduing of the native populations of this region, was especially facilitated by the iron weapons and the military experience they had obtained in West Asia.[209] Introduced into the Pontic Steppe during this period by the Scythians was the use of scale armour, which the Royal Scythian aristocracy had themselves borrowed from the West Asian peoples.[113][208]

Expansion into Central Europe

Migration of the Sindi

As part of the Scythians' expansion into Europe, a section of the Scythian tribe of the Sindi left the region of the Maeotian Sea and, over the course of the 7th to 6th centuries BC, migrated westwards into the eastern section of the Pannonian Steppe, where they settled alongside the Sigynnae.[158]

The majority of the Sindi instead remained in Ciscaucasia, where they settled on the peninsula which came to be known as the Sindic Chersonese (Ancient Greek: Σινδικη Χερσονησος, romanized: Sindikē Khersonēsos) after them,[158] and where they formed a ruling class over the native Maeotians, who were themselves of native Caucasian origin.[348][310]

In the forest steppe

The presence of Scythian aristocratic burials in the forest steppe suggests that the Scythian kingdom in the 6th BC century was still continuing its policy of trying to establish its authority on the native populations of the forest steppe, as also attested by the how these latter populations were still building fortified settlements to defend themselves from Scythian attacks.[150]

The Scythians were able to expand their hegemony into part of the forest steppe situated to the east of the Borysthenēs river over the course of the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC, soon after the end of their activities in West Asia, but they were only starting to enter the parts of the forest steppe to the west of the Borysthenēs at this time.[97]

Once the Royal Scythians had moved from Ciscaucasia into the Pontic Steppe in the late 7th century BC and they had subjugated the eastern forest steppe, they collaborated closely with the ruling elites of the forest steppe tribes. During the 6th century BC, this dependancy of the forest steppe sedentary population consisted of tribute-offering, in exchange of which the Scythians would avoid launching military raids against them and would let the local rulers preserve their political organisation and preside over the production of agricultural produce to be given as tribute to the Scythians.[349]

Scythian mounted archer, Etruscan art, early 5th century BC.[350]

Raids to the west

Once the centre of Scythian power had shifted into the Pontic Steppe, from around c. 600 BC the Scythians often raided into the adjacent regions, with Central and Southeast Europe being a frequent target of their attacks.[90][47][74] Attacks by the Scythians were directed not only at Transylvania, Podolia and the Pannonian Steppe,[90][94][150] but might also have been directed at southern Germania, where they attacked the Lusatian culture and caused its destruction, and from there, until as far as Gaul,[351] and possibly even the Iberian peninsula:[158] these Scythian incursions were not unlike those of the Huns and the Avars during the Migration Period, and of the Mongols in the mediaeval era, and were recorded in Etruscan bronze figurines depicting mounted Scythian archers.[352]

Multiple settlements of the Lusatian culture were destroyed by Scythian attacks during this period,[90] and Scythian arrowheads have been found at several sites located in what are present-day Poland and Slovakia, such as at Witaszkowo, Wicina [pl], Strzegom, Polanowice [pl], and Smolenice-Molpír [sk]. The Scythians also attacked, sacked and destroyed many of the wealthy and important Iron Age settlements[353] located to the north and south of the Moravian Gate and belonging to the eastern group of the Hallstatt culture, including that of Smolenice-Molpír, where Scythian-type arrows were found at this fortified hillfort's access points at the gate and the south-west side of the acropolis[354]

Westwards Scythian influences

Due to these Scythian incursions, new early Scythian-type objects originating from the steppes, consisting of Scythian-type weapons and horse-equipment, as well as remains associated with the early Scythians, started appearing from this time in Central Europe especially in Bessarabia, Transylvania, the Thracian and Pannonian plains, and what is presently Slovakia.[355] Trade and the migration of some Scythian splinter groups into the Pannonian Basin also contributed to the appearance of these Scythian-type objects there.[74]

Some of the populations of the Lusatian culture, as well as the eastern groups of the Hallstatt culture, might also have been influenced by the Scythians and therefore borrowed weapon and horse harness types from them:[356] interactions with the Scythians led to the adoption of the Scythian-type "Animal Style" art and mounted archery by the population of these regions in the subsequent period.[357][353] It was also at this time that the Scythians introduced metalwork types which followed Shang Chinese models into Western Eurasia, where they were adopted by the Hallstatt culture.[347] Scythian artistic influences were also absorbed by Celtic art at this time.[352]

Trade between the Pontic Scythian kingdom and the nomads of the Pannonian Basin as well as the migration of splinter Scythian groups there contributed to the transformation of the culture of these peoples into a more Scythian-like form. Among the populations influenced were the Agathyrsi of Transylvania and the Sigynnae of the north and northwest Pannonian Basin:[358] after the Sigynnae had settled into the Pannonian Steppe in the 8th century BC, their originally Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk culture evolved into the Mezőcsát group, which itself evolved into the Vekerzug culture after coming under Scythian influence.[57]

Second wave of Greek colonisation

The establishment of the Pontic Scythian kingdom was a catalyst for the development of extensive trade connections, and it was only after the bulk of the Scythians had moved into the Pontic Steppe that more permanent Greek colonies were founded in this region:[209] the second wave of Greek colonisation of the north coast of the Black Sea, which started soon after c. 600 BC, involved the formation of settlements possessing agricultural lands (Ancient Greek: χωραι, romanized: khōrai) for migrants from Miletus, Corinth, Phocaea and Megara[274] seeking to establishing themselves to farm (Ancient Greek: αποικια, romanized: apoikiai) in these regions where the land was fertile and the sea was plentiful.[280]

The relations between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek colonies of the northern Pontic region were therefore initially largely peaceful, owing to which the Greek cities possessed no defensive walls and were surrounded by unfortified rural khōrai in which were produced the grain that was consumed in the cities or exported.[17] The prosperity of these new Greek cities depended more on the agricultural production of their khōrai than on trade transiting through them being largely located on the coasts of the Tauric Chersonese.[277]

However, the areas most especially favoured by this wave of colonisation were the Trachean and Sindic Chersoneses, which not only controlled the passage through the Cimmerian Bosporus linking the Black Sea to the Maeotian Sea and therefore also provided access to the rivers flowing into it,[280][277] but also because of the large numbers of fish thriving in the nutrient-rich waters of the Maeotian Sea.[277] The Cimmerian Bosporus was thus so particularly attractive for the Greek settlers[277] that about nine new colonies were founded on both the Trachean and Sindic Chersoneses over the course of c. 580 to c. 560 BC, including Krēmnoi [uk] on the Maeotian Sea near the estuary of the Tanais river, and later at Pantikapaion,[280] followed by more places,[17] so that about a dozen Greek colonies were soon located around the Cimmerian Bosporus.[277] All of these colonies on the Cimmerian Bosporus were port cities, with the settlement of Pantikapaion, which directly overlooked the strait, being the most important of them.[280][277]

Among these Greek colonies, the most prominent ones would be Pontic Olbia, which served the demands of the Scythian aristocracy of the Borysthenēs river valley, and Pantikapaion, who supplied the Scythian aristocrats in the Tauric and Sindic Chersoneses.[150]

Pontic Olbia was one of the most important cities founded during this second wave of colonisation, and was located on the mainland next to the emporion of Borysthenēs.[328][17][280] The emporion itself was soon moved to Olbia due to the poor quality of the port facilities of the island of Borysthenēs,[281] leading to Olbia soon overshadowing the colony Borysthenēs[277] to instead itself become an important cultural and commercial centre.[359]

In the Pontic Steppe, the Greek colonists also found appealing opportunities to trade with the Scythians[280] by selling them wine, olive oil, textiles, metal vessels, high quality ceramic, and luxury goods in exchange for furs, raw materials, fish, animal products, slaves, and grains:[360] Pontic Olbia especially supplied the Scythians with luxury goods such as personal ornaments, gold and silver vases, glyptic, wine, and oil, as well as defensive and offensive weapons produced in workshops located in Olbia itself or imported from mainland Greece.[309] Olbia's main commercial partner in Greece during this period was the city-state of Athens;[327] during the 6th century BC Olbia was also importing large amounts of painted ware from Rhodes, Samos, Corinth, and Ionia, as well as wine in amphorae from Chios and Thasos, and bronze objects such as tools and mirrors, which were all sold to the Scythians,[327] who especially bought Corinthian and Athenian pottery.[309]

An important gold trade route also connected Pontic Olbia with the inland areas, running north into the territory of the tribe of the Arotēres, and from there leading into inner Asia:[361] the Greek cities were able to grow and thrive quickly because they had been able to develop extensive trade relations with distant regions thanks to the rule of the Scythian kingdom over the Pontic Steppe and of its kings' establishment of a Pax Scythica which ensured that traders were safe from robbers. This thriving trade route in turn was an important source of profits for the Scythian royalty and aristocracy thanks to which they obtained significant wealth.[362] The relations between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek traders were therefore mutually beneficial and influenced both the nomadic Scythians and the forest steppe populations, with the Scythian aristocracy profiting significantly from this trade.[327][328]

Olbia especially maintained friendly relations with the surrounding populations at this time,[359] especially with the Arotēres, with whom it had close connections.[363]

Another factor which forced the Greek colonists to maintained friendly commercial, economic and political relations with the Scythians was the fear of possible Scythian attacks, in which case the Greek fortifications would not be able to withstand the attacks of the strong and large Scythian army. Therefore, the Greeks of the Pontic coast sent rich gifts to the Scythian kings and petty lords as tribute in exchange of their neutrality or even support. Scythian aristocracy reciprocated the Greek cities' amicable attitude by adopting the same friendly policy towards the Greek cities.[364]

The contacts between the Scythians and the Greeks led to the formation of a mixed Graeco-Scythian culture, such as among the "Hellenised Scythian" tribe of the Callipidae, the Histrians, the Geloni to the north of Scythia, and the Hellenised populations in and around Crimea.[365]

Rise of the Persian Empire

Meanwhile, in West Asia, the Median, Lydian, and Neo-Babylonian empires which the Scythians had interacted with during their stay to the south of the Caucasus Mountains had been replaced over the period of c. 550 to c. 539 BC by the Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus II, the king of the Persians, who were a West Asian Iranic people distantly related to the Scythians.[262][366]

The society of the Achaemenid Empire under Cyrus II and his earlier successors at this time still preserved many aspects of the earlier common Iranic culture which they shared in common with the Scythians.[66]

The formation of the Persian Achaemenid Empire constituted a further pressure from the south which forced the Scythians to remain to the north of the Caucasus and of the Black Sea. Like during the 8th to 7th centuries BC, however, influences from Achaemenid-ruled West Asia would flow northwards across the Caucasus Mountains and would influence Scythian culture.[64]

Third wave of Greek colonisation

In c. 547 BC, Cyrus II had conquered the Lydian Empire and brought Anatolia under the rule of his newly founded Persian Achaemenid Empire,[367] consequently setting in march a large outflow of Greek refugees fleeing the Persian conquest, of whom many fled to the north coast of the Black Sea, thus in turn starting a third wave of Greek colonisation of this region, lasting from around c. 560 BC until c. 530 BC.[368]

Red-figured amphora with a Scythian warrior, 480-470 BC, from Athens

Although the Greek cities of the Aegean Sea were still founding new colonies throughout all the coasts of the Black Sea, some of the already existing colonies were also starting to set up their own colonies, leading to the growth of the Greek migrant population in all of these settlements. This third wave of colonisation was complex, as attested by how the settlement of Chersonesus in the Tauric Chersonese was founded in the later 6th century BC, but would later be re-settled by colonists from Pontic Heracleia in the 5th century BC.[369]

The importance of the Greek colonies of the north Black Sea coast drastically increased following the Persian Achaemenid Empire's conquest of Egypt in 525 BC by Cambyses II, son of Cyrus II, which deprived the states of Greece proper of the Egyptian grain that they depended on.[277]

These grain supplies were so important to the city-states of Greece, most especially of the then dominant Greek power of Athens, that this latter city started seeking new locations for producing grain on the north shore of the Black Sea. Therefore, Athens established very well defended new colonies on the north Black Sea coast near the already existing settlements, including Nymphaion near Pantikapaion, Athēnaion near Theodosia, and Stratokleia near Phanagoreia, which would act as sites where grain of very good quality was produced to be exported to Athens to feed its citizenry.[370]

The various Greek city-states of the Aegean Sea also imported fish, furs and slaves from Scythia during this period,[371] and in the mid-6th century BC the Greeks started employing Scythian mercenaries in the form of detachments of mounted archers to support their own hoplite armies.[372]

The relations between the Greeks and the Scythians continued remaining largely peaceful during the later 6th century BC,[17] although the only Greek colony in the region of the lower Tanais river, Krēmnoi, was destroyed by the Scythians between c. 550 and c. 525 BC, and Pantikapaion might have been destroyed by the Scythians around c. 550 BC.[17]

First wave of Sauromatian immigration

To the east of the Scythian kingdom across the Tanais lived the Sauromatians, who were an Iranic tribe closely related to the Scythians, and who were organised into a single tribal confederation. This Sauromatian kingdom maintained good relations with the Scythian kingdom throughout its existence, from the 6th to 4th centuries BC, thanks to which there existed a trade route starting in Scythia and reaching eastwards through the territory of the Sauromatians,[373] with Scythian art in the middle Tanais river region exhibiting influences from the Sauromatian culture and, to a lesser degree, from the Ananyino culture.[112]

However, in the period from c. 550 to c. 500 BC, the various Sauromatian communities living from the region stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Caspian Steppe came pressure from the Massagetae of Central Asia[81] as a result of the campaigns of Cyrus II against this latter people.[360] Due to these pressures, the Sauromatians from the territory of the Araxes Steppe in the east over the course of the 6th century BC took over the control of Ciscaucasia from the Scythian kingdom, beginning with the territory to the east of the river Laba, and then the whole Kuban valley.[310][374][17]

By the end of the 6th century BC, the Scythians had lost their territories in the Kuban Steppe to the Sauromatians, and the Scythian earthworks in this region were abandoned,[375] except for those in its westernmost part which included the Sindic Chersonese, where the Scythian Sindi tribe formed a ruling class over the native Maeotians independently of the bulk of the Scythians in the Pontic Steppe,[348][310] due to which this country was named Sindica. By the 5th century BC, the Scythians had completely retreated from Ciscaucasia,[352] and Sindica was the only part of this region where the Scythian culture still survived.[310]

This process resulted in a wave of Sauromatian nomads crossing the Tanais river, immigrating into Scythia, settling near the Royal Scythians in the region of the Maeotian Sea on the right bank of the Tanais up to the Borysthenēs,[336][373] and intermarrying with the local nomad inhabitants of the Pontic Steppe.[376] The arrival of this wave of Sauromatian immigration destroyed several settlements in the river valleys of the Borysthenēs and of the other rivers of Scythia,[310][377] and it might possibly have caused the replacement of the older Scythian ruling dynasty of Spargapeithes by a new one, founded by Ariapeithes.[378]

Introduced in Scythia by the Sauromatian immigrants in the late 6th century BC was a new funerary rite, where the deceased were inhumated in "catacombs" made of one or more burial chambers branching from a vertical entrance well. These "catacomb" burials would become more commonly used for aristocratic burials in the 5th and 4th centuries BC.[379] Scythian art from soon after this time also reflected influences from Central Asian and Siberian tradition.[112]

This Sauromatian immigration also introduced new social norms into Scythia thanks to which women were now allowed to become warriors.[380] Thus, the graves of Scythian women from this period and later contained the burials of armed women, mostly belonging to ordinary nomads, and more rarely to richer nomads, with 37% of Scythian women's burials containing the graves of armed women.[381] The grave goods of these tombs reflected influences from the east, such as bronze daggers characteristic of the Tagar culture, as well as human individuals with East Asian features,[348] and one deceased woman was buried in a grave whose location corresponds to present-day Novosilka near Lypovets along with a Central Asian camel.[348][382]

Anacharsis

The famous Scythian sage Anacharsis came from the Scythian royal dynasty in the 6th century BC, being the brother of the then reigning king Sauaios, and both Anacharsis and Sauaios being the sons of the preceding Scythian king Gnouros.[17][383]

Some time in the late 6th century BC, Anacharsis left Scythia to travel to Greece, where he became respected enough as a skilled philosopher that he was granted Athenian citizenship.[384][385] According to Herodotus of Halicarnassus, Anacharsis was shot with an arrow by his brother the king Sauaios as punishment for having performed a sacrifice to the Mother of the Gods in the wooded country of Hylaia, where was located an altar to this goddess.[386][387][17][385]

Although much regarding the historicity of Anacharsis is uncertain, he later became popular in ancient Greek literature, in which he appeared as a sort of "man of Nature" and "noble savage" incarnating "Barbarian wisdom," after which he especially a favourite figure of the Cynics.[17][385]

At this time, the Scythians were ruled by a triple-monarchy, with the names of the kings Skōpasis, Taxakis, and Sauaios's son Idanthyrsus, being recorded for the late 6th century BC.[388][17]

The Persian invasion

Main article: Scythian campaign of Darius I

Map of the Scythian campaign of Darius I.

Persian soldiers (left) fighting against Scythians. Cylinder seal impression.[389]

In the late 6th century BC, the Achaemenid Persian Empire started expanding into Europe, beginning with the Persian annexation of all of Thrace,[30] after which the Achaemenid king of kings Darius I crossed the Istros river in 513 BC[390] and attacked the Scythian kingdom with an army of 700,000 to 800,000 soldiers,[391] possibly with the goal of annexing it.[30]

In response, the Scythian king Idanthyrsus summoned the kings of the peoples surrounding his kingdom to a council to decide how to deal with the Persian invasion.[392] The Budini, Geloni and Sauromatians joined the Scythian-led alliance in resisting the Persian invasion,[393] and Idanthyrsus led the joint forces of the Scythians and their allied neighbours in resisting the Persian invasion.[17] Meanwhile, the Agathyrsi, Androphagi, Melanchlaeni, Neuri and Tauri refused to support the Scythians.[394][395]

According to Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the Scythian-led alliance's strategy was to adopt the tactic of retreating before the Persian army and staying one day's march ahead of them instead of directly fighting them, while also employing scorched earth tactics so as to goad the Persian army deeper into the deserted parts of Scythian territory. The Persian army eventually crossed the Tanais river and built fortifications there,[102] but the Scythians continued their tactics until the Persian army was no longer at a safe distance from the Istros, allowing the Scythians to launch guerrilla attacks on it.[396][360][397]

The results of this campaign are unclear, with Darius I himself claiming that he had conquered the Sakā tayaiy paradraya (lit. 'the Saka who dwell beyond the (Black) Sea'[30]), that is the Pontic Scythians,[17] while the ancient Greek literary tradition, following the account of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, claimed that the Persian campaign had been defeated by the Scythians, due to which the Greeks started perceiving the Scythians as being invincible thanks to their nomadic lifestyle:[102][396][17] Herodotus's narrative is itself considered dubious by modern historians,[102] and his account of the failure of Darius appears to have been extremely exaggerated.[398] Some form of Achaemenid authority might have been established in Pontic Scythia as a result of this campaign without it having been annexed.[399]

According to Herodotus, soon after the Persian invasion, the Scythians sent a diplomatic mission to Sparta in Greece with the goal of establishing a military alliance against Darius I. Herodotus claims that, as a result of this embassy, the Spartans started drinking undiluted wine, which they called the "Scythian fashion" of drinking wine.[384] The planned attack against the Achaemenid Empire however never happened.[386]

Middle (or Classical) period

The retreat of the Scythians from Ciscaucasia[310] and the arrival of the Sauromatian incomers into the Pontic Steppe in the late 6th century BC caused significant cultural changes in Scythia, giving rise to the Middle or Classical Scythian period,[400] which itself was a hybrid culture originating from a combination of a continuation of the material culture reflected in the Ciscaucasian Scythian burials with Sauromatian elements.[352]

Among the changes in Scythia in this period was a significant increase in the number of monumental burials: it was from the Middle Scythian period that the largest number of Scythian burials in the Pontic Steppe were made, with the Scythian upper classes starting to bury their dead within the Pontic Steppe itself largely in the region of the rapids of the Borysthenēs river (possibly the country of Gerrhos mentioned by Herodotus), although some aristocratic burials were also located in the forest steppes.[401] These burials, which included horse sacrifices, were continuations of the Ciscaucasian burial traditions.[402][403] Scythian burials from this period include:[404]

some significant sites in the region of the Borysthenēs river rapids, such as the Hostra Tomakivska mohyla [uk], the 1st barrow of the Zavadska Mohyla, the 5th barrow of the Novohryhorivka mohyla [uk], Baby mohyla, and Rozkopana mohyla [uk];

some in the Tauric Chersonese, such as the Zoloty kurhan [uk] and Kulakivsky kurhan [uk].

Consolidation

As a result of the arrival of the Sauromatian incomers, and due to the need to resist Persian encroachment, the Scythian kingdom underwent political consolidation in the early 5th century BC,[405] during which it underwent the most significant of its economic, political, social, and cultural development by completing its evolution from a tribal confederation into an early state polity[406][407] capable of dealing with the polities threatening or trading with it in an effective way;[408] during this period, the Scythian kings increased their power and wealth by concentrating economic power under their authority.[409]

It was also during this period that the control of the Scythians over the western part of their kingdom became heavier and more coercive with respect to the sedentary agricultural peoples living to the west of the Borysthenēs.[337]

Expansionism

A consequence of this consolidation of the Scythian kingdom was an increase in its expansionism and militarism.[17]

In Thrace

In the west, nearby Thrace became a target of Scythian expansion following the complete Achaemenid retreat from Europe,[386][17] with the Scythians coming into conflict with the various Thracian peoples during the 5th century BC,[386] and gaining free access of the Wallachian and Moldavian Steppes[410] while also establishing a presence to the south of the Istros river, around Kallatis and Dionysopolis.[411]

In 496 BC, the Scythians launched a raid until as far south as the Thracian Chersonese on the Hellespont.[412]

The Scythians' inroads in Thrace were however soon stopped by the emergence of the Odrysian kingdom in this region, following which the Scythian and Odrysian kingdoms mutually established the Istros as their common border after concluding friendly and mutually advantageous relations with each other some time around c. 480 BC:[411][413] from then on, the contacts between the Scythians and Thracians deepened, with each borrowing from the other's art and lifestyle; marriage between the Scythian and Odrysian aristocracies were also concluded,[411] including between their respective royal dynasties, with the Scythian king Ariapeithes marrying a daughter of the Odrysian kingdom's founding king Tērēs I[386][17] some time between c. 480 and c. 460 BC.[413]

At some point between c. 475 and c. 460 BC,[413] Ariapeithes was killed by the Agathyrsian king Spargapeithes,[414] after which he was succeeded as king by his son Scyles,[378] whose mother was a Greek woman[415] from Histria.[416]

In Sindica

To the southeast, the Scythians came into conflict with their splinter tribe of the Sindi, with whom they fought by crossing the frozen Cimmerian Bosporus during the winter.[386]

In the forest steppe

A second direction where the Scythian kingdom expanded was in the north and north-west: the Scythian kingdom had continued its attempts to impose its rule on the forest steppe peoples throughout the 7th and 6th centuries BC, and by the 5th century BC, it was finally able to complete the process of subjugating the groups of these populations living to the west of the Borysthenēs after destroying their fortified settlements,[417] which were subsequently abandoned.[150]

With the completion of the subjugation of the forest steppe by the Scythians, the various ethnic groups inhabiting this region interacted to the point that their cultures fused with that of the Scythians, leading to the originally Scythian-type burials in kurgans which had originated in Ciscaucasia becoming widespread among the forest steppe populations.[418]

During the 5th century BC, Scythian rule over the forest steppe people became increadingly dominating and coercive, leading to a decline of their sedentary agrarian lifestyle, especially in the region of the right bank of the Borysthenēs, where their settlements disintegrated and became fewer in number.[419] This in turn resulted in a reduction in the importation of Greek goods by the peoples of the forest steppe in the 5th century BC.[420]

The presence of Scythian kurgans from the site corresponding to modern Boryspil attests that the Scythians also appear to have captured territories from the tribes of the forest steppe at this time.[421]

On the Pontic coast

The peaceful relations which had until then prevailed between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek colonies of the northern Pontic region came to an end during the period of expansionism in the early 5th century BC, when the Scythian kings for the first time started trying to impose their rule over the Greek colonies.[17] In response to hostility from the Scythian kingdom, the Greek cities erected defensive installations while their khōrai were destroyed or abandoned, meaning that they lost their agricultural production base, while burials of men killed by Scythian arrows started appearing in their nekropoleis.[422]

At the same time, because the Scythian kingdom still needed to trade with the Greeks in the lower Tanais region, in the early 5th century BC it replaced the formerly destroyed Greek colony of Krēmnoi with a Scythian settlement for this purpose, located at the site corresponding to present-day Yelizavetovskaya [ru][17] in the delta of the Tanais river.[423] The population of this 40 hectare settlement was composed mostly of Scythians and a minority community of Greek merchants, with a smaller fortified section of this city being the residence of the local Scythian aristocrats, thus putting trade in this region directly under the control of the Scythian kingdom.[17][423]

The hold of the Scythian kingdom on the western part of the northern Pontic region became firmer under the reign of the king Scyles,[411] who was successfully able to impose Scythian rule on the Greek colonies in the northwestern Pontic coastal region and western Crimea, such as Nikōnion, Tyras, Pontic Olbia, and Kerkinitis, so that Scyles was minting coins at Nikōnion while Kerkinitis was paying tribute to the Scythian kingdom.[411][17]

There was consequently a considerable migration of Scythians into Pontic Olbia at this time,[424][411] and Scyles himself possessed a residence in Olbia which he would visit every year.[17] The Greek colonies of the Black Sea coast thus continued adhering to their Hellenic culture while their population was very mixed, with Scythians being active at all levels of these cities, which even attracted Scythian aristocrats.[415] During this period Greek influences also became more significant among the Scythians, especially among the aristocracy, while the inhabitants of the cities of the north shore of the Black Sea themselves borrowed the use of Scythian bows and akīnakēs swords.[153]

The control of Scyles over the city of Nikōnion corresponded to the period when it was a member of the Delian League, thus putting it under the simultaneous hegemony of both the Scythian kingdom and the Greek city of Athens. This, as well as the contacts established by Athens in the Tauric Chersonese during this period, allowed the Scythian kingdom to engage in indirect relations with Athens when it was at the height of its power.[411] In consequence, a community of Scythians also lived in Athens at this time and was active at all levels of society, as attested by the presence of graves of deceased Scythians in the cemetery of the Kerameikos, where a Scythian retainer had also been buried in the grave precinct of his master.[385]

In the region of the Cimmerian Bosporus, while the Scythian kingdom was initially able to capture Nymphaion, it was however less successful at conquering the other Greek colonies there, where around 30 cities, including Myrmēkion, Tyritakē, and Porthmeus, banded together into an alliance under the leadership of Pantikapaion, built or strengthened their city walls, and successfully defended their independence. After this, they united into the Bosporan kingdom with Pantikapaion as its capital so as to manage their trade ventures and to organise their common defence against the Scythians.[105][17][371] The Bosporan kingdom soon became a centre of production for Scythian customers living in the steppes, and, being a significant outpost of Greek culture, it therefore influenced both the Scythians and the Sindi by contributing to the development of Scythian art and style.[105]

Despite the conflicts between the Scythian kingdom and the Greek cities, mutually beneficial exchanges between the Scythians, Maeotians and Greeks continued, and, throughout the Pontic Steppe, Scythians and Greeks lived and died in the same communities,[201] with the presence of Scythian burials in this city's necropolis attesting of the presence of marriages between the ruling elite of Nymphaion and the Scythian aristocracy.[17]

Commercial activities

Grain trading

As result of these expansionist ventures, the Scythian kingdom, whose core population lived in the steppe between the forest steppe and the coastal region and therefore dominated these latter two regions, implemented an economic policy through a division of labour according to which:[359][407][17]

the settled populations of the forest steppe produced grain, which until then they were allowed to freely sell, but were now obliged to offer to the Scythian aristocracy as tribute;

this grain offered in tribute was then shipped through the Borysthenēs and Hypanis rivers to Pontic Olbia, Tyras, and Nikōnion;

these latter Greek cities, who had to specialise in trading after having lost their agricultural lands, in turn acted as trading agents by selling the grain at a profit for themselves.

The outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in Greece proper in 431 BC to some extent further increased the importance of the Pontic Steppe in supplying grain to Greece, so that the Bosporan kingdom became the main supplier of grain to Greece, and the Scythian kingdom in turn became an important seller of grain to the Bosporan kingdom: the Scythian nomadic aristocracy thus became the main intermediary in providing to the Bosporan kingdom the grain produced from the fertile and traditionally agricultural regions of the forest steppe and obtained through cultivation within the Scythian kingdom itself.[406]

Slave trading

In the 5th century itself, the Greek cities in the Aegean Sea had started to import slaves from Scythia immediately after the end of the Persian invasions of Greece. The Greek cities acted as slave trade hubs but did not themselves capture slaves, and instead depended on the Scythian rulers to acquire slaves for them:[425][426] although Scythian society was not heavily dependent on slaves, unlike the Greeks, the Scythian aristocrats nonetheless still found it profitable to acquire slaves from their subordinate tribes or through military raids in the forest steppe, who were then brought to Pontic Olbia, where they were sold to Greek merchants.[425][426][427]

An Attic red-figure vase-painting of a Scythian archer. Epiktetos, 520–500 BC.[428]

Among the Scythian slaves bought by the Greeks, one particular group was bought immediately after the Battle of Salamis by the city of Athens,[429] where they constituted an organisation of public slaves employed by the city itself as an urban police force who acted as watchmen and guards and maintained order among the general publics. These "Scythian archers" would round up unwilling citizens and kettle them to vote, could be called by the chairman of the Ekklēsia to remove anyone speaking for too long, and had the power to make arrests.[430]

Other Scythian exports

In addition to slaves, the Scythians sold cattle and animal products to the Greeks.[431]

Import of Greek goods

The Greek colonies during this time were the main suppliers of luxury goods and art to the Scythians,[362] and Greek-type gold objects from Scythian graves of this period may thus have originated as gifts from Greek dependants or Greek families allied to Scythian aristocrats which had been offered to these aristocrats as part of complex gifting traditions used to make and secure fealty bonds or form family ties through marriage.[201]

Trade with the Greeks especially created a thriving demand for wine in Scythia:[432] In exchange for slaves, the Greeks sold various consumer goods to the Scythians, the most prominent among these being wine. The island of Chios in the Aegean Sea, especially, produced wine to be sold to the Scythians, in exchange of which slaves from Scythia were sold in the island's very prominent slave market.[427]

Other commodities sold by the Greeks to the Scythians included fabrics, vessels, decorations made of precious metals, bronze items, and black burnished pottery.[431]

Economic prosperity

Under these conditions, the grain and slave trade continued, and Pontic Olbia not only did not decline, but instead experienced economic prosperity.[17][427]

The Scythian aristocracy also derived immense revenue from these commercial activities with the Greeks,[421] most especially from the grain trade,[433][409][17] with Scythian coins struck in Greek cities bearing the images of ears of grain.[433] This prosperity of the Scythian aristocracy is attested by how Scythian art in this period largely celebrated the military success of the Scythian mounted warriors,[409][420] as well as by how the lavish aristocratic burials progressively included more relatives, retainers, and were richly furnished with grave goods, especially imported ones, consisting of gold jewellery, silver and gold objects, including fine Greek-made toreutics, vessels and jewellery, and gold-plated weapons.[434]

There was a very significant stratification in Scythia in terms of social and property among both the aristocratic and commoner the Scythians during this period, and Scythian commoners did not obtain any benefits from this trade, with luxury goods being absent from their tombs.[406] That this economic success was limited to the Scythian aristocracy is reflected by how Scythian art in this period largely portrayed elements of prestige, as well as the divinisation of royal power, the cults of ancestral heroes, and celebrated military valour.[381]

Greek influence

Scythian warrior with axe, bow, and spear. Possibly Greek work 4th-2nd century BCE (archaic). Marble with red paint and gold leaf

A consequence of the Scythians' close contacts with the Greek cities and of their import of Greek-manufactured art and luxury goods was that Greek art significantly influenced Scythian art and artistic preferences, in turn causing a progressive Hellenisation of the Scythian aristocracy.[362][17]

The Greek supply of luxury goods in turn influenced Scythian art,[362] so that the vegetal motifs which the Greek artisans used to decorate these goods were organically integrated into the "Animal Style" art of the Scythians and became used in works produced by both Greek and Scythian craftsmen.[328][17]

Greek influence thus became a factor which shaped the evolution of Scythian weapons and horse harnesses, which were developed following Scythian norms and slowly perfected so they could be used more effectively: the Scythian composite armour, for example, was fitted with Greek-type shoulder guards in the 5th century BC.[328]

Early sedentarisation

Beginning the 6th century BC, a period of deepening ties and the intensification of trade with the already sedentary Greeks led to the development of sedentary forms of economy in the more nomadic parts of the Scythian kingdom;[150][435] the climate of the steppe around this time also became warmer and wetter, which caused grass which the nomads to rear their large herds of animals to grow abundance, thus allowing them to settle down in the steppe itself;[49][436][437] these factors acted as catalysts for the process of sedentarisation of many nomadic Scythians which started during the Middle Scythian period in the late 5th century BC.[438]

The Scythian aristocracy, who played an important role in the grain trade and were its primary profiters,[433] were investing in increasing the grain production within the Scythian kingdom,[406] and therefore expanded cereal cultivations to the regions adjacent to the Bosporan kingdom through which they exported their grain, especially in the Tauric Chersonese.[433] This policy acted as a catalyst for the intensification of the process of sedentarisation of the Scythians, especially along the reaches of the lower Borysthenēs where the terrain was propitious for agriculture.[406]

This process of sedentarisation was especially concentrated in the eastern part of the Tauric Chersonese, near the cities of the Bosporan Kingdom, but it was also occurring elsewhere in Scythia, with several village-sites forming on the left bank of the estuary of the Tyras near Nikōnion, and nomadic Scythians who had settled down had founded along the banks of the Borysthenēs and the smaller rivers of the steppe small settlements where were cultivated large amounts of crops such as wheat, millet and barley.[421][150]

Consequently, part of the nomadic Scythians were adopting a settled lifestyle during the 5th century BC, especially along the reaches of the lower Borysthenēs where the terrain was propitious for agriculture, and where they formed small unfortified settlements. Part of the population of the khōrai of Pontic Olbia at this time was also composed of settled Scythians.[439][17] The archaeological evidence suggests that the population of the Tauric Chersonese, most of whom were Scythians who had settled down to farm, during this time increased by 600%, especially in the Trachean Chersonese.[437][440][420]

The development sedentarisation and settlement-formation finally led to the foundation in the late 5th and early 4th centuries BC of several new city-sites:[441][442][17] among these settlements were important city-sites located on major routes which provided access to the major rivers of Scythia,[443] and corresponding to present-day Yelizavetovskaya at the mouth of the Tanais, Traxtemyriv on the upper Borysthenēs, Nadlymansʹke near the estuary of Tyras, Bilsk [uk] on the Vorskla river,[435] and Kamianka at the confluence of the Borysthenēs and its tributary of the Konka river.[17]

Despite this significant sedentarisation of the nomads, the majority of Scythians during this time and until the 3rd century BC however still remained composed of nomads.[421][439]

The city of Kamianka

Internal tribal migrations within the Scythian kingdom during the 5th century BC appear to have caused central power to move to the region of the bend of the Borysthenēs,[444] so that much of the Scythian settlements of the 5th and 4th centuries BC were located in the valley of the Borysthenēs and of its tributaries until the coastal region:[352] the site of Kamianka, located in the Borysthenēs bend region and built in the late 5th century BC, was the largest and most important of the Scythian city-sites,[445][446] measuring 12 square kilometres, and was protected by earthen ramparts, moats, the rivers and the salt lake of Bilozerka.[447]

The "acropolis" of Kamianka was located high above the Konka river and was separated from the outer city by double-shell earthworks and a rampart topped by a Greek-style mudbrick wall. Large amounts of Greek red-figure pottery, wine amphorae, black lacquerware, krātēres for mixing wine and water, imported jewellery, and bones of game animals killed during hunts have been found in the "acropolis" of Kamianka by archaeologists,[150][448][449] implying that it was the location of the seasonal royal Scythian headquarters;[450] much of the goods from the "acropolis" of Kamianka, such as the Greek pottery, were Bosporan-imported, attesting of the close links between the Scythian and Bosporan kingdoms at this time.[441]

By the Middle Scythian period, the centre of Scythian metallurgy had shifted into the steppe,[439] in the "outer city" of Kamianka, which was considerably larger than the acropolis,[435] and was the residence of an agriculturalist population as well as of the metalsmiths who manufactured objects from copper, lead and zinc, gold- and silverwork, such as tools, simple jewellery, as well as weapons and armour and horse trappings used by the nomadic population of the steppe.[451] Kamianka contained several blacksmiths' workshops which were contentrated into craftsmens' quarters,[452] with 900 hectares of the city being dedicated to industrial scale metal production.[443]

An open tract in was also located in the southeast of the "outer city," and was perhaps used for grazing cattle, sheep and goats[435] or for defensive purposes.[442]

Thus, the city of Kamianka had become the economic, political and commercial capital of the Scythian kingdom in the late 5th century BC.[421][439]

The city of Yelizavetovskaya

During this period, in the 5th to early 4th centuries BC, the site corresponding to present-day Yelizavetovskaya had become a well-fortified city where resided the local Scythian clan and tribal lords, and which functioned as the Scythian kingdom's administrative, commercial and manufacturing centre for the lower Tanais and northern Maeotian sea region.[421][439]

Succession struggle

Some time around c. 440 BC,[413] Scyles was overthrown by his half-brother Octamasadas, who was himself the son of Ariapeithes and of the daughter of the Odrysian king Tērēs I.[386][378][17] Scyles fled to the Odrysian kingdom, but Tērēs I's son and successor to the Odrysian kingship, Sitalkēs, met his nephew Octamasadas on the Odrysian-Scythian border on the Istros river, where Sitalkēs handed to him his half-brother Scyles, was executed by Octamasadas, while Octamasadas himself handed to Sitalkēs one of his uncles, a brother of Sitalkēs who had fled to Scythia.[453]

Nothing is known about the third son of Ariapeithes, Oricus, other than that his mother was a Scythian woman and that he was likely the youngest son of Ariapeithes.[378][413] Oricus might have even never become king,[17] and some time after Octamasadas ousted Scyles, coins were minted in Pontic Olbia bearing the name of one Eminakos, who was either a governor of Olbia for Octamasadas or a successor of his.[424][17]

External relations

As a result of the Scythian kingdom's prosperity during this period, neighbouring populations borrowed elements of Scythian culture.[153]

With Central and Western Europe

The populations of Central and Western Europe were still borrowing from the Scythians at this time, and Scythian-type arrowheads were found in these regions.[153]

With Thrace

Scythian vessel from Voronež, 4th century BC. Hermitage Museum.

Thanks to the close family connections of Octamasadas to the Thracian Odrysian dynasty through his mother, contacts between the Scythian kingdom and Odrysian-ruled Thrace intensified during the period from c. 440 to c. 400 BC.[454]

Significant Thracian influence consequently appeared in the grave goods of Scythian kurgans made of precious metals,[153] with the art of Scythian bridle trappings from this period exhibiting influences from Thracian art.[112] Thracian influence on Scythian culture was also visible in the 5th century BC in the form of Scythian production of single-bladed swords based on Thracian battle knives which had handles and crosspieces typical of the Scythian akīnakai.[328]

And, due to the influential position of the Scythian kingdom at this time, the Thracian Getae of the Carpathian and Balkan regions were importing large amounts of Scythian-manufactured weapons and horse equipment.[153]

With the Bosporan kingdom

Soon after the accession of Octamasadas around c. 440 BC, a Thracian aristocrat residing in Pantikapaion named Spartocus seized leadership of the Bosporan kingdom in c. 438 BC,[455][371] becoming the first member of the Spartocid dynasty to rule the Bosporan kingdom.[455] with the rise of the Thracian Spartocus I being possibly connected to the assumption of the pro-Odrysian Octamasadas as king of Scythia.[454]

These changes in the Bosporan Kingdom also led to cultural changes within it in the late 5th century BC, so that the Greek customs which had until then been normative there gave way to more Scythian ones.[456]

Under the Spartocid dynasty, the Bosporan kingdom would thrive and maintain stable military, political and economic relations with the Scythian kingdom[457] which allowed it, with Scythian support, to be able expand its rule to the whole Trachean and Sindic Chersoneses and conquer several non-Greek territories on the Asian side of the Cimmerian Bosporus[440][17] so that it soon covered a wide territory stretching across the whole eastern coast of the Maeotian Sea till the mouth of the Tanais river in the north.[371]

This process transformed the Bosporan kingdom into a cosmopolitan realm whose populations consisted of Greeks descended not only from the original settlers in the region as well as more recently arrived Athenian colonists, but also of Hellenised Thracians; members of this population in turn intermarried with Scythians from the Tauric Chersonese and Sauromatians living to the east of the Tanais river, which further added to the ethnic diversity of the Bosporan Kingdom.[458]

It was then that Pontic Olbia started declining, partly due to the instability within the Scythian steppe to its north, but also because most of the trade, including the grain exports of the Scythian kingdom,[433] passing through Oblia until then shifted to transiting through the cities of the Cimmerian Bosporus constiting the Bosporan Kingdom at this time.[327][435]

The Scythians instead started importing ornaments, expensive weapons, horse harness decorations, cultic vessels made of previous metals, and pottery mostly manufactured in Pantikapaion in the Bosporan kingdom, and much of the grave goods, such as finely decorated vases, rhyta, toreutics, headgear and footwear for the Scythian aristocracy, jewellery, and decorative plaques for gōrytoi and to decorate clothing, had been made in Bosporan Greek workshops,[309][328] whose products thus replaced Olbian ones.[459]

Thus, while Pontic Olbia was slowly declining, the trade between the Scythian and Bosporan kingdom continued to thrive, with the cities of the Cimmerian Bosporus being the main transit point through which Pontic Scythia was importing luxury goods from Thrace and fine tableware and wine from Greece, and where were located the workshops of the Greek craftsmen who produced luxurious goldwork for the new Scythian aristocracy.[377]

Around that same time, Athenian commercial influence in the Bosporan Kingdom started declining, and, despite Athens sending someone as renowned as Pericles to negotiate, its influence in the Bosporan Kingdom had fully come to an end by the time that it had lost the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC.[456]

With Athens

However, following Athens's defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the Greeks living on the north shore of the Black Sea started buying more grain from the Scythians to export to Athens to end the food shortage there, resulting in the growth of trade with the Greek cities of the northern Black Sea.[407]

Second wave of Sauromatian immigration

With the pressure of groups of the Massagetae moving into the countries of the Sauromatians in the regions between the Ural Mountains and the Tanais river continuing,[81] sometime between c. 430 and c. 400 BC, a second wave of migration of Sauromatians from the Araxes Steppe entered Scythia, where these newcomers intermarried with the Scythian tribes already present there[441][17] after which they may possibly have established themselves as the new ruling aristocracy of the Scythian kingdom.[446][377]

The Royal Scythians might possibly left the Borysthenēs river valley under pressure from the new Sauromatian incomers and moved to the west, where they consolidated themselves on the coastal area to the west of the Hypanis river, and established their new headquarters in the northwestmost part of Thracian coast located immediately to the south of the Istros river.[441][377] The sedendary communities of the forest steppe also came under pressure from this new wave of nomadic incomers.[407]

Period of instability

The immigration into Scythia of the new wave of Sauromatian arrivants as well as the internal conflicts among the Scythians themselves, caused a temporary destabilisation of the Scythian kingdom[17] which caused it to lose control of the Greek cities on the north shores of the Black Sea. Thus, the Greek colonies no longer faced any military threats from the Scythians, as evidenced by how Pontic Olbia, Nikōnion, and Tyras started to not only rebuild their khōrai, but even expanded them during the late 5th and early 4th centuries BC.[17] It was also at this time that the Scythian kingdom lost control over Nymphaion, which was annexed by the Bosporan kingdom, which had itself been expanding its territories on the Asian side of the Cimmerian Bosporus.[17]

The second wave of Sauromatian immigration had however also brought an end to the earlier trade routes of Scythia linking Olbia to the rich region of the middle Borysthenēs river where were located the markets it served, thus reducing its influence to a small coastal area between the Tyras and Borysthenēs rivers and initiating a period of slow decline for this city.[377][435]

Golden Age

The period of instability ended soon, and Scythian culture experienced a period of prosperity during the 4th century BC,[386][17] which was an unusually calm period in the broader Pontic and Danubian regions.[420]

Scythian gold comb from Solokha, early 4th century BC

About 3,000 Scythian funerary monuments from the 4th century BC, and, out of those 2,300 already excavated by archaeologists in the 1980s, nearly 2,000 dated from this period while a smaller number dated from the preceding 5th century BC:[460] with most Scythian monuments and the richest Scythian royal burials dating from this period,[17] as exemplified by the lavish Čortomlyk mohyla [uk].[420]

Most of the Scythian royal tombs of the 5th and 4th centuries BC were largely located in the country of Gerrhos, which corresponds to Borysthenēs river valley within a 45 kilometre wide radius from the river's rapids that prevent further northwards navigation on the river.[345] It is from the 4th century BC itself that can be dated two of the most lavishly furnished groups of Scythian burials in the region of the Borysthenēs rapids:[461][17]

the "royal" burials, which were the richest group, consisted of the Solokha mohyla, Velyka Cymbalka [uk], Čortomlyk mohyla [uk], Ohuz mohyla [uk], Oleksandropil [uk], and Kozel mohyla [uk];

the "aristocratic" burials were the second richest group, and included the Berdyansky kurhan [uk], Tovsta, Čmyreva mohyla [uk], 8th barrow of the Five Brothers kurgan [uk], Melytopolsky kurhan [uk], Zhovtokamianka [uk], and Krasnokutsky kurhan [uk];

in addition to these, several Scythian burials were also present in the territories of the Greek colonies of the north shore of the Black Sea, such as several rich tombs from the necropolis of Nymphaion, and the very lavish Kul-Oba kurgan near Pantikapaion.

Trade with the Greeks

This height of Scythian power corresponded to a time of unprecedented prosperity for the Greek colonies of the northern Black Sea, with whom the relations of the Scythian kingdom remained peaceful during this period: there was high demand for the Greek cities' trade goods, grains, slaves, and fish, thanks to which the relations between the Pontic and Aegean regions, especially with Athens, were flourishing.[411]

Scythian warrior, from Kul-Oba.

Although the Greek cities of the coast extended their territories considerably at this time, this did not infringe on the Scythians, who still possessed abundant pastures and whose settlements were still thriving.[420] A large number of the toreutics used by the Scythians themselves as aristocratic and royal grave goods were during this period being made by Greek craftsmen, attesting of the strong Greek influence that the Scythians were then coming under and of the increasingly pronounced Hellenisation of the Scythian upper classes.[17] Consequently, Scythian culture, especially that of the aristocracy, experienced rapidly-occurring extensive Hellenisation as a result of these extensive contacts with the Greek colonies on the Black Sea shore in the 4th century BC.[17]

Scytho-Bosporan relations

The rule of the Spartocid dynasty in the Bosporan Kingdom under the kings Leukon I, Spartocus II and Pairisadēs I was also favourable for the Scythian kingdom because they provided stability which allowed both the Scythian and Bosporan kingdoms to flourish.[420] Leukon employed Scythians in his army,[420] and he was able to capture Theodosia with the help of Scythian horse cavalry, which he claimed to trust more than his own army.[457]

Extensive contacts existed between the Scythian and Bosporan nobilities,[420] possibly including dynastic marriages between the Scythian and Bosporan royalty:[17] the rich burial of Kul-Oba belonged to one such Scythian noble who had close family ties to a member of the Bosporan aristocracy or even the ruling Spartocid dynasty, and who therefore chose to be buried at Kul-Oba following Scythian rites in a Greek-style tomb carved from stone.[17][415]

During this time, and with the support of the Scythian kings, the sedentarised Scythian farmers sold large amounts of grain reaching up to 16,000 tonnes to Pantikapaion, who in turn sold this grain to Athens in mainland Greece.[457] The dealings between mainland Greece and the northern Pontic region were significant enough that the Athenian Dēmosthenēs had significant commercial endeavours in the Bosporan kingdom, from where he received a 1000 medimnoi of wheat per year, and he had the statues of the Bosporan rulers Pairisadēs I, Satyros I and Gorgippos insalled in the Athenian market.[420]

Dēmosthenēs himself had had a Scythian maternal grandmother,[383] and his political opponents Dinarchus and Aeschines went so far as to launch racist attacks against Dēmosthenēs by referring to his Scythian ancestry to attempt discrediting him.[420][383]

Early Sarmatian immigration

The Scythian kingdom experienced an early wave of immigration by a related Iranic nomadic people, the Sarmatians, during the 4th century BC, to the Pontic steppe.[420][462][345] This slow flow of Sarmatian immigration continued during the late 4th and early 3rd centuries BC,[345][462] but these small and isolated groups did not negatively affect its hegemony.[420]

The reign of Ateas

Coin of the Scythian king Ateas

Reverse: depicting a mounted warrior and a coin legend reading ΑΤΑΙΑΣ

Reverse: depicting a mounted warrior and a coin legend reading ΑΤΑΙΑΣ

Obverse: depicting the head of Herakles

Obverse: depicting the head of Herakles

Between c. 360s and 339 BC, the Scythians were ruled by their most famous king, Ateas,[463] whose reign coincided with the growth of the kingdom of Macedonia under its king Philip II into a powerful kingdom capable of annexing much of Thrace until the Istros river.[385] Estimates for the extent of the power of Ateas range from him having united all of Scythia from the Istros to the Tanais under his power[406][386] to him being a leader of a group of Scythians who had retreated westwards under Sauromatian pressure and ruling only the western part of the Scythian kingdom.[464][17][385]

By this period, Scythian tribes had already settled permanently on the lands to the south of the Istros corresponding to the region now called the Dobruja,[377] and possibly in what is presently the Ludogorie region as well, where the people of Ateas lived with their families and their livestock. Consequently, the Tauric Chersonese and the region between the lower Istros and the Black Sea in northeastern Thrace both started being called "Little Scythia" (Ancient Greek: Μικρα Σκυθια, romanized: Mikra Skuthia; Latin: Scythia Minor).[465]

The main activities of Ateas were directed towards the Scythian border with Thrace on the Istros, so that by around c. 350 BC he had captured lands from the Getae and expanded Scythian hegemony to the lands south of the Istros[381][386] and to the Greek cities of the coast of the Black Sea and the parts of Thrace immediately south of the Istros, where he captured Kallatis and issued coins there.[413][420][17] Ateas also successfully battled the Thracian Triballi and the Dacian Histriani,[464][420][17] as well as threatened to conquer the city of Byzantion,[420] where he may also have struck his coins.[381]

Since both Ateas and Philip had been interested in the region to the immediate south of the Istros, the two kings formed an alliance against the Histriani.[466] However, this alliance soon fell apart after Ateas refused to support Philip II's advance on Byzantion, and war broke out between the Scythian and Macedonian kingdoms, ending in 339 BC in a battle at the estuary of the Istros where died the then 90 year old Ateas while Philip II was wounded,[467] after which the Macedonians captured 20,000 Scythian women and children, a large number of cattle and more than 20,000 thoroughbred horses.[468]

The Scythian kingdom had lost its new territories in Thrace and to the north of the Istros due to this defeat,[17] which allowed the Getae to cross the Istros and settle between the Pyretos and the Tyras rivers.[381] The power of Scythian kingdom was however not harmed by the death of Ateas, and it did not experience any weakening or disintegration as a result of it:[465] the Kamianka city continued to prosper and the Scythian burials from this time were still as lavishly-furnished as those of the most prosperous periods of the 4th century BC,[469][386] and a Scythian population continued to live in northeast Thrace.[381][17]

The late 4th century BC

The defeat against Philip II would however be followed by a series of military defeats of the Scythian kingdom which would lead to it experiencing a very significant decline during the late 4th century BC.[470]

Although the experience of Philip II's military dealings with the Scythians led his son Alexander III to choose to avoid attacking the then still powerful Scythians,[471] in 335 BC Alexander III crossed the Istros into Scythian territory during his campaign against the Getae, which harmed the remaining trade networks that Pontic Olbia could still depend on.[435]

Between 339 and 329 BC, a Scythian king whose name has not been recorded fought a war against the king Pairisadēs I of the Bosporan kingdom.[413]

In 331 or 330 BC, Alexander III's general Zopyrion, who was then acting as the governor of Thrace, campaigned against the Getae and the Scythian kingdom. Although Zōpyriōn's army of 30,000 men was able to reach Pontic Olbia and besiege it, they failed to capture it, and were defeated by the Scythians, with Zopyrion himself getting killed.[472] Despite Zopyrion's defeat, his attack initiated the final decline of Olbia, and various tribes from the West such as the Celts started moving into its territories.[435]

Nevertheless, in 329 BC, the Scythian kingdom sent an embassy to Alexander at the time of his campaign in Bactria and Sogdia, after which Alexander sent an ambassador of his own to go to Pontic Scythia with the returning Scythian embassy. Alexander's ambassador came back with another Scythian embassy after he had spent the winter in Bactria. During this time, the king of Scythia died and was succeeded by his brother, Agaros, in c. 328 BC.[473]

In 313 BC, the Agaros attempted to invade the territory to the south of the Istros again, but was defeated by the Macedonian king of Thrace, the diadoch Lysimachus.[470]

In 309 BC, Agaros participated in the Bosporan Civil War on the side of Satyros II, son of Pairisadēs I, against his half-brother Eumēlos.[386] Agaros provided Satyros with 20,000 infantrymen and 10,000 cavalrymen,[457] and after Satyros was defeated and killed, his son, also named Paerisades, fled to Agaros's realm for refuge.[474]

In the early 3rd century BC, the Scythian kingdom started declining economically as a result of competition from Egypt, which under the Ptolemaic dynasty had again become a supplier of grain to Greece.[433]

End of Pontic Scythia

In the early 3rd century BC, the Scythian kingdom faced a number of interlocking unfavourable conditions, such as climatic changes in the steppes and economic crises from overgrazed pastures and a series of military setbacks, as well as the intensifiation of the arrival from the east of the Sarmatians,[475] who launched ravaging atttacks against the Scythians,[462] defeated them,[476] and captured their pastures,[477] with the smaller and more active Sarmatian groups overwhelming and subjugating the more numerous but politically static Scythians[462][476][477] With the deprivation of its pastures, which were its most important resource,[477] the Scythian kingdom suddenly collapsed,[469][17] Scythian rule over the Pontic Steppe ended,[470][478] and the Scythian capital of Kamianka was abandoned.[441][445][452]

The Sarmatian tribe responsible for most of the destruction of the Pontic Scythian kingdom were the Roxolani, who had in the 4th century BC lived the trans-Araxes region, and from there crossed the Tanais river and captured the Pontic Steppe up to the Borysthenēs,[445][345] where they may have become a mixed Scytho-Sarmatian tribe at this time.[479]

As a consequence of the sudden end of the Pontic Scythian kingdom, the material culture of the Scythians also disappeared in the early 3rd century BC,[17] with the large Scythian kurgans stopping being built and the large cities, such as the one at Gelonus, being abandoned at that time,[477] and there being no known Scythian or Sarmatian monuments from this period.[17][345] With the end of the Scythian kingdom, the peoples of the forest steppe became independent again returned to their original mixed farmer sedentary lifestyle while all Scythian elements disappeared from their culture.[480]

With the end of the Pontic Scythian kingdom, grain exports from the northern Pontic region declined drastically,[425] while Greek inscriptions stopped mentioning names of Scythian slaves, which were instead replaced by slaves of Sarmatian, Maeotian and other northern Pontic origins.[429]

Following the invasion, the Sarmatian tribes became the new dominant force of the Pontic Steppe,[470] resulting in the name "Sarmatia Europa" (lit. 'European Sarmatia') replacing "Scythia" as the name of the Pontic Steppe,[478] and the name "Sarmatians" replacing that of "Scythians" as the generic designation of the peoples of the Pontic-Caspian Steppes until the invasion of the Huns.[316]

Sarmatian pressure against the Scythians continued in the 3rd century BC,[470] so that the Sarmatians had reached as far as the city of Chersonesus in the Tauric Chersonese by 280 BC,[17] and most native and Greek settlements on the north shore of the Black Sea were destroyed by the Sarmatians over the course of the c. 270s to c. 260s BC,[481] causing the Greek cities of the north shore of the Black Sea to decline, sometimes even into desolate ruins.[482]

Around this time, the Scythians of the Tauric Chersonese had already become vassals of a Sarmatian tribe whose queen Amage allied with the city of Chersonesus. At one point, Amage intervened against these Scythian vassals of hers and executed their king for being rebellious.[483] The historicity of Amage is however unclear.[477]

In the regions to the west of the Borysthenēs, some Celtic groups crossed the Carpathians and settled down in the valleys of the Tyras and Pyretus rivers.[345] These Celts, along with the Thracian Getae and the Germanic Bastarnae from the west, were also putting the Scythians under pressure by seizing their lands to expand their own territories.[484]

By around some time between c. 220 and c. 210 BC, the Protogenes inscriptions recorded the Scythians as one of the minor groups who, along with the Sarmatian tribes of the Thisamatae and Saudaratae, were seeking shelter from the allied forces of the Celtic Galatae and the Germanic Sciri in the region of the Borysthenēs river near Pontic Olbia.[483][478]

By the early 2nd century BC, the Bastarnae had grown powerful enough that they were able to stop the southward advance of the Sarmatians along the line of the Istros river.[485]

Late period

Remains of Scythian Neapolis near modern-day Simferopol, Crimea. It served as the capital of the Little Scythia in the Tauric Chersonese.

With the Sarmatian invasion and the collapse of the Pontic Scythian kingdom, the Scythians were pushed to the fringes of the northern Pontic region where urban life was still possible, and they retreated to a series of fortified settlements along the major rivers and fled to the two regions both known as "Little Scythia,"[477] which remained the only places where the Scythians could still be found in by the 2nd century BC were:[486]

the first Little Scythia, whose capital was Scythian Neapolis, was composed of the territories of the Tauric Chersonese and the lower reaches of the Borysthenēs and Hypanis rivers;

the second Little Scythia was located in the northeast of Thrace immediately to the south of the mouth of the Istros river and the west of the Black Sea, in the territory corresponding to present-day Dobruja.

Relief of the most well-known kings of the Tauric Little Scythia, Skilurus and his son Palacus.

By this time, although the Scythians living in the Tauric Chersonese had managed to retain some of their nomadic lifestyle, the limited area of their polity forced them to become more and more sedentary and to primarily engage in stockbreeding in far away pastures, as well as in agriculture, and they also acted as trading intermediaries between the Graeco-Roman world and the peoples of the steppes.[446][17]

With sedentarisation, both fortified and unfortified settlements replaced the older nomadic camps in the basin of the lower Borysthenēs river, which prevented the remaining Scythians from continuing to maintain a steppe economy.[487] Therefore, the number of fortified settlements in the Tauric Chersonese increased with the retreat into this territory and away from the steppe of the Scythian aristocracy, who was then rapidly embracing a Hellenistic lifestyle.[446][488] By the 1st century BC, these Scythians living in the Tauric Chersonese had fully become sedentary farmers.[489]

These later Scythians slowly intermarried with the native Tauri and the infiltrating Sarmatians,[464] and their culture had little to do with the earlier classical Scythian culture, instead consisting of a combination of those with the traditions of the Tauroi from the mountains of the Tauric Chersonese and of the Greeks of the coasts, and exhibiting Sarmatian and La Tène Celtic influences.[17]

In the 1st century BC, both Little Scythias were destroyed and their territories annexed by the king Mithridates VI Eupator of the kingdom of Pontus[446][489][17] despite the Scythians' alliance with their former enemies, the Roxolani, against him.[490][491]

End

The Scythian populations in both Little Scythias continued to exist after the end of Mithridates's empire, although they had become fully sedentary by then and were increasingly intermarrying with the native Tauri, hence why Roman sources often referred to them as "Tauro-Scythians" (Ancient Greek: Ταυροσκυθαι, romanized: Tauroskuthai; Latin: Tauroscythae).[490][489][17]

These late Scythians were slowly assimilated by the Sarmatians over the course of c. 50 to c. 150 AD,[17] although they continued to exist as an independent people throughout the 2nd century AD until around c. 250 AD:[492] in the settled regions of the lower Borysthenēs, lower Hypanis, and the Tauric Chersonese, an urbanised and Hellenised Scythian society continued to develop which also exhibited Thracian and Celtic influences.[153]

The Scytho-Sarmatian Iranic nomads' dominance of the Pontic Steppe finally ended with the invasion of the Goths and other Germanic tribes around c. 200 AD,[445][493][494] which was when the Scythian settlements in Crimea and the lower Borysthenēs were permanently destroyed.[492][490]

The Scythians nevertheless continued to exist until the invasion of the Huns in the 4th century BC, and they finally ceased to exist as an independent group after being fully assimilated by the other populations who moved into the Pontic Steppe at the height of the Migrations Period in the 5th century BC.[492][495][490]

Legacy

The Graeco-Roman peoples were profoundly fascinated by the Scythians. This fascination endured in Europe even after both the disappearance of the Scythians and the end of Graeco-Roman culture, and continued throughout Classical and Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, lasting till the 18th century in the Modern Period.[496]

Antiquity

In West Asia

The inroads of the Cimmerians and the Scythians into West Asia over the course of the 8th to 7th centuries BC, which were early precursors of the later invasions of West Asia by steppe nomads such as the Huns, various Turkic peoples, and the Mongols, in Late Antiquity and the Mediaeval Period,[497] had destabilised the political balance which had prevailed in the region between the dominant great powers of Assyria, Urartu, and Phrygia,[320] and also caused the decline and destruction of several of these states' power, consequently to the rise of multiple new powers such as the empires of the Medes and Lydians,[222] thus irreversibly changing the geopolitical situation of West Asia.[498]

These Cimmerians and Scythians also influenced the developments in West Asia through the spread of the steppe nomad military technology brought by them into this region, and which were disseminated during the periods of their respective hegemonies in West Asia.[320]

For the Achaemenids, there were three types of Sakas: \* the Sakā tayai paradraya ("beyond the sea", presumably the Scythians between the Greeks and the Thracians on the Western side of the Black Sea), \* the Sakā tigraxaudā (Massagetae, "with pointed caps"), \* the Sakā haumavargā ("who lay down Hauma", furthest East). Soldiers in the service of the Achaemenid army, Xerxes I tomb detail, circa 480 BC.[499]

The inroads of the Cimmerians and Scythians in West Asia over the course of the late-8th to late-7th century BC led to significant changes in this region.[84]

The Achaemenid Persian Empire indiscriminately referred to the steppe nomads as Sakā: within this scheme, the Scythians of the northern Pontic region were labelled in Old Persian texts as Sakā tayaiy paradraya ((𐎿𐎣𐎠 𐏐 𐎫𐎹𐎡𐎹 𐏐 𐎱𐎼𐎭𐎼𐎹; lit. 'the Saka who dwell beyond the (Black) Sea', in contrast to the Sakā tigraxaudā (𐎿𐎣𐎠 𐏐 𐎫𐎡𐎥𐎼𐎧𐎢𐎭𐎠; lit. 'Saka who wear pointed hats' and Sakā haumavargā (𐎿𐎣𐎠 𐏐 𐏃𐎢𐎶𐎺𐎼𐎥𐎠; lit. 'Sakas who lay hauma (around the fire)' who lived in Central Asia.[38]

The ancient Israelites called the Scythians ʾAškūz (אשכוז), which through a scribal error was corrupted to ʾAškənāz (אשכנז), appears in the Hebrew Bible, where ʾAškənāz is closely linked to Gōmer (גֹּמֶר‎), that is to the Cimmerians.[500][11][137][501]

The Hebrew Bible also mentions ʾAškənāz together with Minni (מני), that is Mannai, and ʾArārāṭ (אררט), that is Urartu, reflecting how the Scythian core territory in West Asia was located close to these two states.[36][137][502]

In ancient art

The ancient Greeks from Anatolia who had witnessed the wars between the Scythians and Cimmerians symbolically depicted Scythian warriors during the 6th to 5th centuries BC as hunting dogs in the midst of battle. This was a Greek folkloric reinterpretation of young Scythian warriors who, following the Indo-European passage rite of the [[Kóryos|kóryos]], would ritually take on the role of wolf- or dog-warriors.[503]

In Graeco-Roman literature

The first mention of the Scythians in ancient Greek literature is in Hesiod's Catalogue of Women, which refers to them as the "mare-milking Scythians" (Ancient Greek: Σκυθας ιππημολγους, romanized: Skythas hippēmolgous) and as the "milk-drinkers who have wagons for houses" (Ancient Greek: γλακτοφαγων εις γαιαν απηναις οικι εχοντων, romanized: glaktophagōn eis gaian apēnais oiki ekhontōn)[504] Hesiod also referred to the Scythians along with the Ethiopians and Libyans as peoples "whose mind is over their tongue," that is who approve of prudent reserve.[505]

According to Herodotus of Halicarnassus

Herodotus of Halicarnassus wrote a legendary account of the arrival of the Scythians into the lands of the Cimmerians:[506]

after the Scythians were expelled from Central Asia by the Massagetae, they moved to the west across the Araxes, and took possession of the Cimmerians' lands after chasing them away;

the approach of the Scythians led to a civil war among the Cimmerians because the "royal tribe" wanted to remain in their lands and defend themselves from the invaders, while the rest of the people saw no use in fighting and preferred to flee;

since neither side could be persuaded by the other, the "royal tribe" divided themselves into two equally numerous sides that fought each other till death, after which the commoners buried them by the Tyras river.

According to Herodotus, the Cimmerians fled to the south by following the shore of the Black Sea, and passed through Colchis before arriving in Anatolia. Meanwhile, the Scythians followed them, but missed the Cimmerians and instead followed the shore of the Caspian Sea, which led them into the lands of the Medes who were then besieging Nineveh under their king Cyaxares, who was defeated by the Scythians who then imposed their rule on Media and on all of Upper Asia for 28 years.[507]

According to Herodotus's account of the Cimmerians' flight, they moved south by following the shore of the Black Sea, while their Scythian pursuers followed the Caspian Sea's coast, thus leading the Cimmerians into Anatolia and the Scythians into Media.[122][508][509] While Cimmerian activities in Anatolia and Scythian activities in Media are attested, the claim that the Scythians arrived in Media while pursuing the Cimmerians is unsupported by evidence,[122] and the arrival of the Scythians in West Asia about 40 years after that of the Cimmerians suggests that there is no available evidence to the later Graeco-Roman account of the Cimmerians crossing the Caucasus and moving south into West Asia under pressure from the Scythians migrating into their territories.[85][86]

Herodotus's narrative also contracted the events of the Scythians' arrival into West Asia by portraying Madyes as the king led them from the steppes into West Asia.[510]

Herodotus also exaggerated the power of the Scythians in West Asia by claiming that they dominated all of it, which is a claim that finds no evidence for it in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian sources of the 7th century BC.[511]

Herodotus's narrative depicted Scythia as an opposite of Africa, especially Egypt, which was a theme continued by other ancient Greek authors,[505] such as Pseudo-Hippocrates, who represented Greece as being the mean situated between these two extremes.[512]

In later Graeco-Roman literature

By the 5th century BC, the image of the Scythians in Athens had become the quintessential stereotype used for Barbarians, that is for non-Greeks.[427] Following the Greeks' caricatural representation of foreigners as being unmoderated drinkers, they moreso associated the Scythians with drunkenness, which is a caricature that the later Greeks and the Romans also applied to the Celtic and Germanic peoples.[383]

Ancient Greek authors consequently considered the Scythians and Persians, not as related Iranic peoples, but in opposition to each other:[66]

Greek authors held the Scythians as representing "savagery" and linked them to the Thracians;

Greek authors meanwhile held the Persians as representing "refined civilisation" and connected them to the Assyrians and Babylonians.

This notion was reinforced by the Achaemenid invasion of Scythia, which the Greek authors interpreted as a model of the clash between "nomadic savagery" and "sedentary civilisation."[66]

Later Graeco-Roman tradition transformed the Scythian prince Anacharsis into a legendary figure as a kind of "noble savage" who represented "Barbarian wisdom," due to which the ancient Greeks included him as one of the Seven Sages of Greece[513] and he became a popular figure in Greek literature.[17]

The 4th century BC Greek historian, Ephorus of Cyme, described the Scythians as one of the "four great barbarian peoples" of the known world, along with the Celts, Persians, and Libyans.[514] Ephorus used the perception of Anacharsis as a personification of "Barbarian wisdom" to create an idealised image of the Scythians being as an "invincible" people, which became a tradition of Greek literature.[17]

Ephorus created a fictitious account of a legendary Scythian king, named Idanthyrsos or Iandysos, who, 1500 years before the reign of the mythical first Assyrian king Ninus and 3000 years before the first Olympiad, allegedly defeated the equally legendary pharaoh Sesostris and became the ruler of all Asia. This story was a continuation of Ephorus of Cyme's idealisation of the Scythians as an "invincible" people, and was drawn from Herodotus of Halicarnassus's accounts of the Scythian invasion of Asia and the campaign of Darius in Scythia.[515] This legend of the war between Idanthyrsos and Sesostris was itself based on Herodotus's account of the Scythians' raid until the borders of Egypt, where the Saite king Psamtik I bribed them into turning back.[516]

The Ancient Greeks included the Scythians in their mythology, with Herodorus of Heraclea making a mythical Scythian named Teutarus into a herdsman who served Amphitryon and taught archery to Heracles. Herodorus also portrayed the Titan Prometheus as a Scythian king, and, by extension, described Prometheus's son Deucalion as a Scythian as well.[517]

Strabo of Amasia in the 1st centuries BC and AD idealised the Scythians as leading a nomadic life founded on simplicity, thanks to which, according to him, they were the most simple, independent and honest, and the least perfidious people. According to Strabo's narrative, the Scythians became "corrupted" and lost their simple and honest life because of the influence of the Greeks' "love of luxury and sensual pleasures."[518] Following Strabo, the Scythians continued to be represented as an idealised freedom-loving and truthful people Graeco-Roman literature.[446]

The 1st century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus identified the Biblical Gog and Magog with the Scythians, or more generally with nomadic peoples from the north who were held back by the Caucasus Mountains and by the Gates of Alexander the Great.[519]

The Romans confused the peoples whom they perceived as archetypical "Barbarians," namely the Scythians and the Celts, into a single grouping whom they called the "Celto-Scythians" (Latin: Celtoscythae) and supposedly living from Gaul in the west to the Pontic steppe in the east.[520]

As general designation

Herodotus also used the term "Scythians" to designate a number of non-Scythian ethnic groups of the Pontic Steppe as a result of them being dominated by the Scythians proper.[40]

By the Roman period, the name of the Scythians was so widely used as a general designation for various peoples of the steppes that it was applied to various non-Scythian Sarmatian and Germanic tribes.[496]

In Late Antiquity itself, as well as in and the Middle Ages, the name "Scythians" was used in Greco-Roman and Byzantine literature for various groups of nomadic "barbarians" living on the Pontic-Caspian Steppe who were not Scythians, like the Sarmatians and the Alans, or who were not related to the actual Scythians at all, such as the Huns, Goths, Ostrogoths, Gokturks, Pannonian Avars, Slavs, Pechenegs and Khazars.[446][521][522]

For example, Byzantine sources referred to the Rus' raiders who attacked Constantinople in 860 AD in contemporary accounts as "Tauroscythians" because of their geographical origin, and despite their lack of any ethnic relation to Scythians.[523]

Ancient grave robbing

The richness of Scythian burials was already well known in Antiquity, and, by the time the power of the Scythians came to an end in the 3rd century BC, the robbing of Scythian graves started[524] and was initially carried out by Scythians themselves.[525][526]

During Late Antiquity itself, another wave of grave robbery of Scythian burials occurred at the time of the Sarmatian and Hunnish domination of the Pontic Steppe, when these peoples reused older Scythian kurgans to bury their own dead.[526]

Mediaeval period

Although the Scythians themselves had disappeared by the Middle Ages, the complex relations between their nomadic groupings and the settled populations of Southeast and Central Europe were continued by the Hungarians, the Bulgars, Rus and Poles.[527]

Mediaeval authors followed the use of the name of the Scythians as an archaising term for steppe nomads to designate the Mongols.[446]

In Mediaeval European literature

Following the Christianisation of Europe, the view that the peoples of this continent originated in West Asia as the descendants of Japheth became the normative historiography.[528]

The flight of the Scota, Goídel Glas, and the Scythians from Egypt, in a 15th-century manuscript of the Scotichronicon of Walter Bower

At the same time, drawing on the Classical authors' lumping together of the ancient Celts and Scythians under the label of "Barbarians," whereby these peoples, who were the other for the Graeco-Romans, were pictured as sharing traits and resemble each other in how "strange" they were, the various cultures of North Europe started claiming ancestry from the "Celto-Scythians" and adopted the Graeco-Roman vision of the "barbarity" of ancient peoples of Europe as legitimate records of their own ancient cultures.[529]

In this context, the similarity of the name Scythia with the Latin name of the Irish, Scotti,[530] led to the flourishing of speculations of a Scythian ancestry of the Irish, as recorded in the Historia Brittonum of Nennius,[528] and consequently the 8th century text, the Auraicept na n-Éces, claimed that a Scythian named Fénius Farsaid (lit. 'Irishman the Pharisee') presided over 27 scholars using the best parts of the new confused languages at Babel to create the Irish language.[531]

Drawing on the confusion of the Scotti with both Scythia and the Picti, as well as on the late antique conceptualisation of Scythia as a typical "barbarian land" which had persisted into the Middles Ages, Bede in the 8th century itself invented a Scythian origin for the Picts in his Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum.[532]

The Irish mythological text titled the Lebor Gabála Érenn repeated this legend, and claimed that these supposed Scythian ancestors of the Irish had been invited to Egypt because the pharaoh admired how Nel, the son of Fénius, was knowledgeable on the world's many languages, with Nel marrying the pharaoh's daughter Scota.[533] According to the Lebor Gabála Érenn, the Scythians fled from Egypt when pharaoh drowned after Moses parted the Red Sea during the flight of the Israelites, and went back to Scythia, and from there to Ireland via Africa and Spain[533] while Nel's and Scota's son, Goídel Glas, became the eponym the Gaelic people.[534]

Russian Chronicles

Continuing the Graeco-Roman tradition of referring to eastern peoples as "Scythians," the 12th century Primary Chronicle referred to Kyivan Rus as "Great Scythia" (Old East Slavic: великаꙗ скуфь, romanized: Velikaja Skufĭ).[521]

Mediaeval grave robbery

Little is known of the situation of Scythian tombs during the Mediaeval period, when Turkic tribes had moved into the regions formerly inhabited by the Scythians,[526] although the earliest recorded cases of Scythian burials being robbed date from the 15th century BC.[535]

Modern period

Eugène Delacroix's painting of the Roman poet, Ovid, in exile among the Scythians[536]

Modern pseudohistory

Drawing on the Biblical narrative and the Graeco-Roman conflation of the Scythians and Celts, early modern European scholars believed that the Celts were Scythians who were descended from Japheth's son Magog, and that they were related to the Gauls, whom they believed were descended from Japheth's other son Gomer. It therefore became popular among pseudohistorians of the 15th and 16th centuries who drew on this historiography to claim that the Irish people were the "truest" inheritors of Scythian culture so as both to distinguish and denigrate Irish culture.[537]

Scythians at the Tomb of Ovid (c. 1640), by Johann Heinrich Schönfeld

During the early modern era itself, colonial ethnographers used the narrative of Herodotus of Halicarnassus to create an image of the Scythians as a notorious and "savage" people chauvinistically attached to their own customs and opposed to outside influences. Fascinated by this imagery, these ethnographers drew on it to claim populations who were completely unrelated to the Scythians, such as the Irish, Tatars, Mongols, Turks, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as being alleged descendants of the Scythians.[538]

While claims of Scythian and Japhethic ancestry in much of Europe were abandoned during the Reformation and Renaissance, British works on Ireland continued to emphasise the alleged Scythian ancestry of the Irish to confirm their "barbaric" nature; these endeavours were further reinforced by 17th century proto-linguistic hypotheses about "Scytho-Celtic" languages and enjoyed enthusiastic popularity during the 18th century, until these origin hypotheses were finally discredited by early 19th century advances in philology[539] and by the discovery of features common to the cultures of the ancient continental Celts and the Irish.[537]

During the early modern period itself, Hungarian scholars identified the Hungarians with the Huns, and claimed that they descended from Scythians.[540] Therefore, the image of the Scythians among Hungarians was shaped into one of "noble savages" who were valorous and honest, uncouth and hostile to "Western refinement," but at the same time defended "Christian civilisation" from aggression from the East, such as from the Pechenegs, Cumans, and Tatars in the Middle Age, and from the Ottomans in the early modern period.[541] This view was later superseded by the now established scientific consensus that the Hungarians are a Finno-Ugric people.[542]

The 17th century Irish historian Roderick O'Flaherty continued the claim of the Lebor Gabála Érenn that the Irish descended from the Scythians in his history of Ireland titled Ogygia: seu Rerum Hibernicarum Chronologia & etc., in which he identified Fénius Farsaid with the figure of Phoenix, who in Greek mythology was believed to have created the Phoenician alphabet. O'Flaherty elaborated on this by claiming that Fénius Farsaid also invented the Ogham script and the early Greek alphabet from which the Latin alphabet evolved.[543]

In the 18th to 20th centuries, the racialist British Israelist movement developed a pseudohistory according to which, after population of the historical kingdom of Israel had been deported by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 721 BC and became the Ten Lost Tribes, they fled to the north to the region near Sinope, from where they migrated into East and Central Europe and became the Scythians and Cimmerians, who themselves moved to north-west Europe and became the supposed ancestors of the white Protestant peoples of North Europe; being an antisemitic movement, British Israelists claim to be the most authentic heirs of the ancient Israelites while rejecting Jews as being "contaminated" through intermarriage with Edomites or adhere to the antisemitic conspiracy theory claiming that Jews descend from the Khazars.[544][545] According to the scholar Tudor Parfitt, the proof cited by adherents of British Israelism is "of a feeble composition even by the low standards of the genre."[546]

Early modern grave robbery

Large scale robbery of Scythian tombs started when the Russian Empire started occupying the Pontic steppe in the 18th century:[547] in 1718 the Russian Tsar Peter I issued decrees overseeing the collection of "right old and rare" objects to Saint Petersburg in exchange for compensation, and the material thus obtained became the basis of the Saint Petersburg State Hermitage Museum's collection of Scythian gold. This resulted in significant grave robbery of Scythian burials, due to which most of the Scythian tombs of the Russian Empire had been sacked by 1764.[535]

In the 19th century, Scythian kurgans in Ukraine, Kuban, and Crimea had been looted, so that by the 20th century, more than 85% of Scythian kurgans excavated by archaeologists had already been pillaged.[535] The grave robbers of the 18th and 19th centuries were experienced enough that they almost always found the burial chambers of the tombs and stole the treasures contained within them.[547]

Russian Scythianism

Battle between the Scythians and the Slavs (1881) by Viktor Vasnetsov

In the later 19th century, a cultural movement called Skifstvo [ru] (Russian: Скифство, lit. 'Scythianism') emerged in Russia whose members unreservedly referred to themselves and to Russians as a whole as Skify (Russian: Скифы, lit. 'Scythians').[548] Closely affiliated to the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Skify were a movement of Russian nationalist religious mysticists who saw Russia as a sort of Messiah-like figure who would usher in a new historical era of the world,[549] and their identification with the ancient Scythians was a positive acceptance of Dostoevsky's view that Europe had always seen Russians as being Asiatic. The Skify therefore used this image to distinguish Russia from the West, although they nevertheless did not see Russia as being a part of Asia, and their ideas were instead a revival of the old conceptualisation of Russia as being the bridge linking Europe and Asia.[550]

The culmination of Skifstvo was the famous poem written in 1918 by Aleksandr Blok, titled Skify (Russian: Скифы, lit. 'The Scythians'), in which he presented "Scythia," that is Russia, as being different from the rest of Asia while also being closer to Europe. In Skify, Blok depicted Russia as a barrier between the "warring races" of Europe and Asia, and he made use of the racist Yellow Peril ideology by threatening that Russia was capable of stopping its "protection" of Europe and allow East Asians to overrun it.[551]

Life restoration of Protoceratops.

Life restoration of Protoceratops.

Ancient Greek sculpture of a griffin.

Ancient Greek sculpture of a griffin.

The scholar Adrienne Mayor hypothesised over the course of 1993 to 2011 that the legend of the griffin originated among the Scythians, who came across fossilised skeletons of the dinosaur Protoceratops in Mongolia while mining for gold, and retold this discovery to the ancient Greeks, who interpreted them as mythical beings, thus creating the myth of the griffin. This hypothesis was contested by the palaeontologist Mark P. Witton, who argued that the imagery of the griffin originated in early Bronze Age West Asia and was transmitted from there into ancient Greek art during the Orientalising period.[552][553] The imagery of griffins in Scythian art itself was borrowed from the artistic traditions of West Asia and ancient Greece.[17]

The scholar David Anthony has also hypothesised that the martial role of women among Scytho-Sarmatians had given rise to the Greek myths about Amazons.[554] However, according to the Scythologist Askold Ivantchik, the imagery of the Amazons was already known to Homer and was originally unrelated to the Scythians, with the link between Scythians and Amazons in Greek literature beginning only later in the 5th century BC.[555]

Culture and society

Kurgan stelae of a Scythian at Khortytsia, Ukraine

The Scythians were a member of the broader cultures of nomadic Iranic peoples living throughout the Eurasian steppe and possessed significant commonalities with them, such as similar weapons, horse harnesses and "Animal Style" art.[328]

The Scythians were a people from the Eurasian steppe, whose conditions required them to be pastoralists, which required mobility to find natural pastures, which in turn shaped every aspect of the Scythian nomads' lives, ranging from the structure of their habitations and the style of their clothing to how they cooked.[556]

This nomadic culture depended on a self-sufficient economy whose own resources could provide for its sustainance, and whose central component was the horse, which could be used peacefully to barter for commodities and services or belligerently in a form of warfare which provided nomadic fighters superiority until the creation of firearms.[556]

Since the Scythians did not have a written language, their non-material culture can only be pieced together through writings by non-Scythian authors, parallels found among other Iranic peoples, and archaeological evidence.[17]

Location

Early phase in the western steppes

After migrating out of Central Asia and into the western steppes, the Scythians first settled and established their kingdom in the area between the Araxes, the Caucasus Mountains and the Maeotian Sea.[557]

In West Asia

In West Asia, the Scythians initially settled in the area between the Araxes and Kura rivers before further expanding into the region to the south of the Kuros river in what is present-day Azerbaijan, where they settled around what is today Mingəçevir, Gəncə and the Muğan plain, and Transcaucasia remained their centre of operations in West Asia until the early 6th century BC,[558] although this presence in West Asia remained an extension of the Scythian kingdom of the steppes,[17] and the Scythian kings' headquarters were instead located in the Ciscaucasian steppes.[559][346]

During the peak of the Scythians' power in West Asia after they had conquered Media, Mannai and Urartu and defeated the Cimmerians, the Scythian kingdom's possessions in the region consisted of a large area extending from the Halys river in Anatolia in the west to the Caspian Sea and the eastern borders of Media in the east, and from Transcaucasia in the north to the northern borders of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the south.[560][561][562]

In the Pontic steppe

Main article: Scythia

The territory of the Pontic Scythians extended across the Pontic steppe from the Don river in the east to the Danube river in the west and the Prut river in the northwest.[563][42][50][97][564][24][374] To the south, the territory of the Scythians included the steppe regions of Crimea[71] and the Black Sea Lowland, and it was bounded in this direction by the Black and Maeotian Seas[565] from the mouths of the Istros to the Tanais rivers.[97]

To the north of the steppe proper were the forest steppes, which covered the area of the Dnipro hills, the middle reaches of the Dnipro river itself, and stretched from part of the Dnipro Lowland up to the middle Don river. The characteristic features of the forest steppe were the large forest tracts and woodless tracts of meadow steppe.[50]

The Scythian kingdom covered the territory of the treeless steppe immediately north of the Black Sea's coastline, which was inhabited by nomadic pastoralists, as well as the fertile black-earth forest steppe area to the north of the treeless steppe, which was inhabited by an agricultural population,[566] and the northern border of this Scythian kingdom were the mixed deciduous woodlands laying to the north of the forest steppe.[49][71][50]

Until the late 6th century BC, the Scythians' territory also included the Ciscaucasian steppe around the Kuban river, although by the 5th century BC the Scythian kingdom no longer included Ciscaucasia and had become limited by the Don river to its east.[97][374]

Several rivers flowed southwards across this region and emptied themselves into the Black Sea, of which the largest one was the Borysthenēs (Dnipro), which was the richest river in Scythia, with most of the fish living in it, and the best pastures and most fertile lands being located on its banks, while its water was the cleanest; due to this, the Borysthenēs was the central axis of Scythia, and Graeco-Roman authors compared it to the Nile in Egypt. Other important rivers of Scythia were the:[49][50][567]

Istros (Danube),

Tyras (Dnister),

Hypanis (Southern Buh),

Panticapes (Inhulets),

Hypacyris (Kalanchak[568]),

Gerrhus (either Molochna or Konka[461]),

and Tanais (Don).

Climate

The Pontic Steppe at this time was dominated by a temperate climate, with cold winters and summers which were warmer, wetter and damper compared to present-day Ukraine, due to which Graeco-Roman writers wrote exaggerated reports claiming that Scythia was either eternally cold and covered in frost[569] or damp and foggy.[49][436][570]

Pontic Scythia was part of the Eurasian Steppe and was therefore covered by a largely treeless grassland inhabited by the pastoralist nomadic tribes.[37][571][281] To the north of the steppe was a forest steppe zone growing on a distinctly fertile type of black soil, which was inhabited by an agricultural population,[37] and was itself was bordered on the north by mixed coniferous woodlands, then the coniferous taiga, and finally the treeless tundra.[49]

Beginning in the 9th century BC, the climate of the Pontic Steppe became cooler and drier, which led various nomadic groups to move into the forest steppe and the northern foothills of the Caucasus to search for better pastures. By the 5th cenury BC, the climate became warmer and wetter, allowing the nomads to move southwards into the steppe itself.[49]

This wetter and damper environment of the Sub-Atlantic climate was very favourable for settlement in the 1st millennium BC, with the boundary between the steppe and forest steppe being further to the south than the present one, and there was abundance of grass thanks to which the nomads could rear large herds of horses and cattle.[37][572]

The region within the Scythian Pontic realm which was covered with forests was named by the Greeks as the country of Hylaea (Ancient Greek: Υλαια, romanized: Hulaia, lit. 'the Woodland'), and consisted of the region of the lower Dnipro river along the territory of what is modern-day Kherson.[37][572]

In these favourable climatic conditions, the ranges of beavers and elk extended further south than presently, with beavers then being present in the lower Dnipro and lower Southern Buh river valleys, and elk living until the environs of Olbia, and the bones both these animals have been found in kitchen refuse dating from the Scythian period.[37]

Neighbouring populations

The neighbours of the Scythians in the Pontic Steppe included:[573]

the Thracian Getae, who lived to the west of Scythia, across the Danube and Pyretos rivers.

the Melanchlaeni and the Androphagi, who lived to the east of the middle Dnipro river, in the forest steppe bordering the territory of the Royal Scythians to the north, respectively in the valleys of the Donets and Sula rivers. These populations were either of Scythic or of mixed Scythic and native origin.

the Sauromatians, who lived to the east of the Scythians, in the steppe between the Don and the Volga, were another Scythic people. They were the immediate neighbours of the Royal Scythians to the east, across the Don river.

the Neuri, who were a Baltic population of the region of the forest steppe corresponding to modern-day Belarus, lived to the north of the Aroteres. They corresponded to the Milograd culture.

the Agathyrsi lived to the west of the Aroteres and of the Neuri.

the Budini, to the east of the Neuroi and in the valley of the Vorskla river, were either a Scythic tribe,[574] or one of the many Finno-Ugric populations living in the eastern forest steppe until the Ural Mountains.

the Gelonians, to the east of the Dnipro, in the valley of the Vorskla river.

the Maeotians lived on the eastern coast of the Maeotian Sea.

the Tauri lived in the Crimean Mountains.

Little Scythia

After the 3rd century BC, Scythian territory became restricted to two small states, each called "Little Scythia," respectively located in Dobruja and Crimea:

in Dobruja, the Scythian kingdom's territory stretched from Tyras or even Pontic Olbia in the north to Odessus in the south;[489]

in Crimea, the Scythian kingdom covered a limited a territory which included the steppes and foothills of the Tauric Chersonese until Taurida, the lower Borysthenēs, and the lower Hypanis rivers.[469]

Ethnicity

Central Asian Iranic origins

The originally nomadic Scythians who migrated out of Central Asia were an Eastern Iranic people[575] who shared a common language, origins and culture with the Iranic nomads of the Chernogorovka-Novocherkassk complex, such as the Cimmerians.[87]

This origin from Central Asia, which was also ultimately the case with other Iranic peoples such as the Medes, Persians, Parthians, and Sogdians, was visible until at least the 5th century BC in how these various peoples shared common myths as well as styles of dress and ornaments such as the wearing of tunics and trousers.[576][64][65]

Later tribal confederation

Within the Pontic Steppe, the incoming Scythian conquerors became known as the Royal Scythians[37][577] after establishing themselves as the ruling elite over the local population[333] and assimilating them into a single tribal identity while allowing them to continue their various lifestyles and economic organisations,[578][333] so that not all populations of Pontic Scythia were themselves Scythians, with some being under Scythian hegemony and others being independent.[577]

The consequence of this political structure under the suzerainty of the Royal Scythians was many of the non-Scythian populations of the Pontic Steppe becoming designated by the term "Scythians" largely because they lived under the domination of the Iranic Scythian ruling class.[40]

Constituent tribes

The population of the North Pontic Scythian kingdom was a complex political structure composed of both Scythian and non-Scythian peoples:[332][7][579]

the Scythians proper, who were a group of Iranic nomadic pastoralist tribes,[580] were located primarily in the steppe regions of the northern Tauric Chersonese and in the steppes of eastern Scythia, to the north of the Maeotian Sea, and between the rivers Tanais and Borysthenēs for the Royal Scythians, and between the Borysthenēs and the Hypanis for the Nomad Scythians;

various Proto-Slavic and Thracian sedentary farmer tribes[581] populations between the Borysthenēs and the Istros;

the populations in the forest-steppes Borysthenēs-Hypanis interfluve were Proto-Slavs, while those in the region of the Pyretos and southern Borysthenēs rivers were Thracians;[582][583]

some of these sedentary farmers later moved into the Tauric Chersonese.

The Borysthenēs river thus marked a cultural boundary between the sedentary farmers in the west and the pastoral nomads in the east:[446][584] these various populations constituting the overarching Scythian political structure were furthermore organised into tribes which were themselves headed by local lords. These tribes were in turn subject to the dominant tribe of the Royal Scythians, who formed the tribal aristocracy of the Scythians and whose ruling lord was the king of all Scythians.[421]

The Scythians were composed of a number of tribal units,[563] including:[585]

the Royal Scythians were an Iranic tribe who nomadised in the Pontic Steppe, in an area limited by the Dnipro river in the west, and the Don river and the port of Krēmnoi in the east, as well in the Tauric Chersonese up to the Cimmerian Bosporus in its east. Herodotus of Halicarnassus called them the "bravest of the Scythian tribes."

The Royal Scythians were the main Scythian tribe as well as the ruling dominant tribe of the whole of Scythia[586] to whom all the other tribes were subjects, with the high king of all the Scythians coming from the tribe of the Royal Scythians.[421]

the various tribes being each led by their own lords were all subservient to the lord of the Royal Scythians, and they all paid tribute to the Royal Scythians and provided them and the high king with servants.[421]

the Royal Scythians were also known by two other names:

Paralatai (Παραλαται (Scythian: Paralāta) corresponds to the Young Avestan name Paraδāta (𐬞𐬀𐬭𐬀𐬜𐬁𐬙𐬀‎), meaning "placed at the front."[587]

Skōlotoi (Σκωλοτοι) is the Greek form of the Scythian endonym Skulatā, formed by the addition of the plural suffix -tā to the Scythian endonym Skula[17][588]

The Royal Scythians and the Nomad Scythians were the only fully nomadic tribes within Scythia.

the Nomad Scythians, who lived to the west of the Royal Scythians, between the Inhul and the bend of the Dnipro, were a mixed Thracian and Iranic Scythian nomadic tribe. The Nomad Scythians and the Royal Scythians were the only fully nomadic tribes in Scythia.

the Free Scythians, who were a tribe of mixed Scythian-Sauromatian origin, lived in the southeastern Pontic Steppe, between the port of Krēmnoi and the Don or the Donets river.

the Alazones (Ancient Greek: Αλαζονες) or Alizōnes (Ancient Greek: Αλιζωνες), who were the westernmost Scythian tribe, were semi-nomads who occupied the steppe between the Inhul and the Dnister around the region where the Dnister and the Southern Buh flow the closest to each other.

The Alazones led semi-nomadic lives, with those of them who lived in the steppe being pastoral nomads and those who lived in the valleys of the Southern Buh and nearby rivers being farmers who cultivated wheat, onions, garlic, lentils and millet. The Alazones were the southern neighbours of the Aroteres and, like them, might have been of mixed Thracian and Iranic origins. The Alazones were themselves in turn the northern neighbours of the Callipidae.

the Scythian Ploughmen or Scythian Husbandmen, or Arotēres (Ancient Greek: Αροτηρες) who were the northern neighbours of the Alazones, were sedentary agriculturists who lived in a region with fertile black earth corresponding to the modern-day part of Ukraine which lies to the west of the Dnipro river until the region of Vinnytsia. Their neighbours to the north were the Baltic Neuri, and to the south were the Alazones.

The Aroteres were large sedentary Thracian or proto-Slavic[589] population of Scythia who descended from the Late Bronze Age Chernoles Culture, over whom had established themselves an Iranic Scythian ruling class during the 6th century BC.

the Callipidae (Ancient Greek: Καλλιπιδαι, romanized: Kallipidai) were a semi-nomadic population of mixed Greek-Scythian origin who lived across a wide section of land adjacent to the shores of the Black sea ranging from the estuary of the Southern Buh river to the area of modern-day Odesa or even until the estuary of the Dnister. The western neighbours of the Callipadae across the Dnister river were Thracian tribe of the Getae in Bessarabia, while Thracian populations under Scythian rule lived on the coast. Their northern neighbours were the Alazones.

The Callipidae were a considerably Hellenised tribe consisting of a large settled Thracian population with a Scythian ruling class who had significantly intermarried with Greek settlers.

the Scythian Agriculturalists or Geōrgoi (Ancient Greek: Γεωργοι) were another population of Thracian origin. The Geōrgoi lived in the valley of the lower Dnipro river, in the wooded country of Hylaea, and they may have been sedendary or semi-nomadic.

a tribe not named by the Greek authors lived on the north-west shore of the Maeotian Sea, and corresponded to the archaeological "Obytichna 12 type" settlements.

Of the many tribes constituting the Scythian kingdom, the nomadic tribes lived on the steppes immediately to the north of the Maeotian Sea and on the right and left banks of the Borysthenēs river.[589]

In addition to the Scythians themselves, as well as the Thracians who had inhabited the region since the Bronze Age, the population of the Pontic Scythian kingdom consisted of Greeks living in colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea.[590]

There were initially few differences within the many Scythian tribes and tribal groupings in the early period of the Pontic Scythian kingdom, which later became more pronounced as these eventually conquered various native populations.[591]

Related populations

The Scythians were closely related to other Iranic nomads who occupied the Eurasian steppe during Antiquity, such as:[592]

the Cimmerians of the Caspian Steppe;

the Sauromatians of the Volga-Ural region;

the Saka of Central Asia, including:

the Massagetae around the Oxus and the Aral Sea;

other Saka groups in the steppe and montane steppe of what is presently East Kazakhstan;

the Pazyryk culture in what is presently the Altai Republic;

the Tagar culture in the Minusinsk Hollow;

the Aldy-Bel and Sagly cultures in Tuva;

the Chandman culture on the northern and central Mongolian Plateau;

the Yuezhi.

These various steppe nomads were themselves members of the eastern group of Iranic peoples, whose other member populations included the Bactrians, the Chorasmians, and the Sogdians, while the western group of Iranic peoples included the Medes, Parthians and Persians.[593]

These common Iranic origins of Medes, Persians, Parthians, Scythians and Sogdians were visible until at least the 5th century BC in how these various peoples shared common myths as well as styles of dress and ornaments.[64][65]

Language

Main article: Scythian languages

The Scythians as well as the Saka of Central Asia spoke a group of languages belonging to the Iranic family,[594] more specifically to the eastern branch of the Iranic language family.[595][587]

A specific feature of the language of the Pontic Scythians was the transformation of the sound /δ/ (/ð/) into /l/.[595]

The Scythian languages may have formed a dialect continuum: "Scytho-Sarmatian" in the west and "Scytho-Khotanese" or Saka in the east.[596] The Scythian languages were mostly marginalised and assimilated as a consequence of the late antiquity and early Middle Ages Slavic and Turkic expansions. The western (Sarmatian) group of ancient Scythian survived as the medieval language of the Alans and eventually gave rise to the modern Ossetian language.[597]

Social organisation

Class system

See also: Trifunctional hypothesis

Scythian society was stratified along class lines.[598] Herodotus of Halicarnassus named the three classes of Scythians only once in his writings,[144] where he described them as descended from the three sons of the Scythian ancestor-god Targitaos:[599][600][236]

the Auchatae (Ancient Greek: Αυχαται, romanized: Aukhatai), who were the priestly class, descended from Targitaos's eldest son, Lipoxais, occupied the middle position;

the Catiari (Ancient Greek: Κατιαροι, romanized: Katiaroi) and Traspies (Ancient Greek: Τρασπιες, romanized: Traspies), who were the farmer-and-peasant class, descended from Targitaos's middle son, Arpoxais, and occupied the lowest social position;

the Royal Scythians, also called the Scoloti ([Σκωλοτοι] Error: {{Lang}}: invalid parameter: |translit= (help)) and the Paralatae ([Παραλαται] Error: {{Lang}}: invalid parameter: |translit= (help)), who were the warrior-aristocracy, descended from Targitaos's youngest son, Kolaxais, occupied the highest social position and dominated the other two classes,[601] with the Scythian kings belonging to this dominant class.[602]

By the 5th to 4th centuries BC, the Scythian population was stratified into five different class groups:[603]

the aristocracy;

very wealthy commoners;

moderately wealthy commoners;

the peasantry, who were the producer class and formed the mass of the populace;

the poor.

The aristocracy

The Scythian aristocracy were an elite class dominating all aspects of Scythian life[604] consisting of property owners who possessed landed estates large enough that it sometimes took a whole day to ride around them.[605] These freeborn Scythian rulers used the whip as their symbol.[606]

The burials of the deceased from the aristocracy and royalty were the largest ones, varying from 14 to 21 metres in height, and were the most elaborate and luxurouusly-equipped ones: their contents included between 3 and 11 human sacrifices, between 4 and 16 horse sacrifices, the presence of gold on the horse harnesses, and the lavishness and large range of the grave goods.[607]

The Scythian kings, especially, were buried along with servants, cupbearers, grooms, and their entourage from their subordinate tribes, who were killed when the king died and buried in his grave to follow him in the afterlife.[426]

Commoners

The commoners were free but still depended to some extent on the aristocracy.[426] They were allowed to own some property, usually a pair of oxen needed to pull a cart,[65][608] hence why they were called oktapodes (Ancient Greek: οκταποδες, lit. 'eight-feeters') in Greek.[74] By the 4th century BC, the economic exploitation of these free commoners became the main economic policy of Scythia.[406]

Within this system of commoner dependency on the aristocrats and royalty, these elite classes rewarded their dependants' loyalty through presents consisting of metal products whose manufacture was overseen by the elites themselves in the industrial centre located in the Scythian capital city at Kamianka.[443]

The burials of these commoners were largely simple, and contained simpler furnishings and fewer grave goods, although the tombs of commoner warriors could contain weapons, horse gear and sometimes a horse as well.[426][607]

The commoners were buried in fewer kurgans compared to the upper classes, and were sometimes instead inhumated as the sacrificed retinue of in secondary burials of Scythian aristocrats. Similarly, the commoner buried in one of the smaller barrows around the Solokha royal kurgan belonged to a warrior accompanied with five horses, but did not contain much wealth[426]

Serfdom

Serfs belonged to the poorest sections of the native populations of Scythia, and, being tied to the land and not possessing cattle, they were not free and did not own cattle or wagons. Stablemen and farmers were recruited from the serf class.[608]

Slavery

Although Scythian society was not dependent on slavery,[427] A rudimentary form of it was nevertheless practised in Scythia according to which slaves performed only domestic tasks.[340]

However, the Scythian ruling class nevertheless still used a large number of slaves to till the land and tend to the cattle.[605] Slaves were also assigned to the production of dairy products. The Greek author Herodotus of Halicarnassus claimed that the Scythians used to blind their slaves to prevent them from eating the most valuable of these dairy products. He also claimed that the Scythian kings considered the inhabitants of Crimea to be their slaves.[605]

Class hierarchies

The class stratification of Scythian society corresponded to a hierarchy of social standing and property ownership which is visible in how export of the grain cultivated by the common freemen profited only the aristocracy but not these commoners, whose graves lacked the lavish furnishing of the aristocratic burials,[406] although rings, clothing plaques and gold-covered wood handles could still be present in their burials.[609]

This drastic difference between the aristocracy and the commoners is also visible in how Scythian art only represented the interested of the Scythian ruling classes.[610]

Clan structures

Scythian society was constituted of kinship structures where clan groups formed the basis of the community[416] and of political organisation.[577]

Clan elders wielded considerable power, and were able to depose kings, such as when the Scythian army overthrew the king Scyles and the Scythians demanded his extradition from the Thracians, after which he was executed. Following the deposition of Scyles, the power of both the king and the warrior-aristocracy became further entrenched.[388]

As an extension of clan-based relations, a custom of blood brotherhood existed among the Scythians, whereby the blood of the sworn blood brothers was poured in a cup of wine in which their swords, arrows, battle-aces, and spears were lowered before they drank it.[416]

Gender roles

Patriarchy

Scythian society was a patriarchal one where women were subordinate to men, although women from the upper classes were free to ride horses, while women from the lower classes may have not been free to do so and may have spent most of their time indoors.[611] Among the more nomadic tribes, the women and children spent most of their time indoors in the wagons,[576][580] with Herodotus of Halicarnassus having recorded that women held a higher status among the Sauromatians than among the Scythians.[612]

With immigration into Scythia in the late 6th century BC of a wave of Sauromatians, among whom women held high social status,[613][614] the standing of women improved in Scythian society enough that they were allowed to become warriors as from the Middle Scythian period.[615]

Marriage customs

Polygamy was practised among the Scythian upper classes, and kings had harems in which both local women and woman who had been bought lived. Some of these women were the kings' legal wives and others were their concubines. After the deaths of Scythian men, their main wives or concubines would be killed and buried alongside them.[611]

Reflecting the patriarchal structure of Scythian society, the wives and concubines could be passed down as inheritance, as when the Scythian king Scyles married Opoea, who had been one of his father's wives.[611]

Gender non-conformity

Within Scythian priesthood there existed a group of transgender soothsayers, called the Anarya (lit. 'unmanly'), who were born and lived their early lives as men, and later in their lives assumed the mannerisms and social roles role of women.[616]

Administrative structure

The Scythians, like the Cimmerians, were organised into a tribal nomadic state with its own territorial boundaries, and comprising both pastoralist and urban elements. Such nomadic states were managed by institutions of authority presided over by the rulers of the tribes, the warrior aristocracy, and ruling dynasty.[120]

Kingship

The Scythians were monarchical, and the king of all the Scythians was the main tribal chief,[337][236] who was from the dominant tribe of the Royal Scythians.[421][236]

Power among the Scythian kings was passed down a single dynasty,[409][236] and the historian and anthropologist Anatoly Khazanov has suggested that the Scythians had been ruled by the same dynasty from the time of their stay in West Asia until the end of their kingdom in the Pontic Steppe,[617] while the Scythologist Askold Ivantchik has instead proposed that the Scythians had been ruled by at least three dynasties, including that of Bartatua, that of Spargapeithes, and that of Ariapeithes.[17]

Although the kings' powers were limited by the popular [409] and warrior assemblies,[421] royal power itself was held among the Scythians to be divinely ordained: this conception of royal power, which is well documented in the ritual symbols depicted on 5th to 3rd century BC Scythian toreutics, was initially foreign to Scythian culture and originated in West Asia during the period of Scythian presence there in the 7th century BC.[337][185]

The Scythian kings were later able to further increase their position through the concentration of economic power in their hands because of their dominance of the grains trade with the Greeks, which made them and the Scythian warrior-aristocracy as a whole, very wealthy.[409]

After their death, the Scythian kings were buried along with one or some of their wives.[611] The kings also chose servants, cupbearers, courtiers, and members of the royal entourage from the tribes under his authority, who were to be killed and buried along with him to follow and serve him in the afterlife. Warriors belonging to the entourage of Scythian rulers were also buried in smaller and less magnificent tombs surrounding the tombs of the rulers.[426]

By the 4th century BC, the Scythian kingdom had developed into a rudimentary state after the king Ateas had united all the Scythian tribes under his personal authority.[406]

Popular and warrior assemblies

The Scythians were organised into popular and warrior assemblies that limited the power of the kings.[421][409] The gatherings of these assemblies were held in the nomes, such as the one at which the overthrow of the king Scyles was decided.[409]

Dependancy

Scythian aristocrats had dependants: these could be lower-class Scythians, to whom they offered metal products as rewards for their loyalty,[443] or Greeks, from whom they obtained gifts such as objects made of precious metals.[201]

Administrative divisions

The Scythians were ruled by a triple monarchy, with a high king who ruled all of the Scythian kingdom, and two younger kings who ruled in sub-regions. The kingdom composed of three kingdoms which were in turn made of nomes headed by local lords,[618] not unlike the Great Chiefs of ancient Egypt and the Satraps of the Achaemenid Empire.[619]

Ceremonies were held in each nome on a yearly basis.[620]

The Scythians thus possessed a complex political organisation arising from their agro-pastoralist lifestyle and economy. Such structures were also present among:[621]

the ancient Xiongnu, where a supreme ruler presided over several commanders and governors who ruled over different districts at various locations;[619]

and the late nomadic Huns, who possessed a complex system of sub-kings and a complex bureaucracy who served the supreme king.[619]

Economy

Within the Pontic Steppe, the incoming Scythian conquerors established themselves as the ruling elite over the local population and assimilated them into a single tribal identity while allowing them to continue their various lifestyles and economic organisations.[333]

The peoples of Scythia were thus agro-pastoralists[619] consisting of a mix of sedentary farmer populations and nomads,[446][577][333] with the tribes living in the steppes remaining primarily nomadic and having lifestyles and customs inextricably linked to their nomadic way of life.[580]

The dominant tribe of the Royal Scythians, especially, originally led a transhumant warrior-pastoralist nomadic way of life[622] by spending the summer northwards in the steppes and moving southwards towards the coasts in the winter.[623]

With the integration of Scythia with the Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea, the Scythians also soon became involved in activities such as cultivating grain, fishing, trading and craftsmanship.[7]

Pastoralism

The Scythians practised animal husbandry,[446] and their society was highly based on nomadic pastoralism,[580][408][624] which was practised by both the sedendary and nomadic Scythian tribes, with their herds being made up of about 40% horses, 40% cattle, and 18% sheep, but no pigs, which the Scythians refused to keep in their lands.[625][7][580] Horse rearing was especially an important part of Scythian life, not only because the Scythians rode them, but also because horses were a source of food.[408]

During the 1st millennium BC, the wet and damp climate prevailing in the Pontic Steppe constituted a propitious environment which caused grass to grow in abundance, in turn allowing the Scythians to rear large herds of horse and cattle.[626]

Scythian pastoralism followed seasonal rhythm, moving closer to the shores of the Maeotian Sea in winter and back to the steppe in summer, with the grazing location often changing due to the herds and flocks moving on to search for new pastures once the already occupied pastures had been grazed. The Scythians appear to have not stored food for their animals, who therefore likely foraged under the snow during winter.[625]

The strong reliance of the Scythians on pastoralism itself ensured the self-sufficiency of the Scythians, and was conducive towards the nomadic lifestyle.[627] This importance of pastoralism for the Scythians is visible in how representations of pastoral activities formed the predominant theme of Scythian petroglyphic art.[71]

The nomadic Scythians were able to rear large flocks and herds because of the grass growing abundantly on the treeless steppe thanks to the propitious climate then prevailing to the north of the Black Sea,[37][626] and they especially grew barley to provide feed for their animals.[150]

Hunting

Hunting among the Scythians was primarily done for sport and entartainment rather than for procuring meat,[580] although it was occasionally also carried out for food.[408]

Agriculture

Conditions in the southern lands near the shores of the Black Sea, such as in Hylaea and the valleys further north along the Dnipro, were propitious for agriculture[572] and for cultivating cereals, orchards and vineyards.[569] In addition to the sedentary Scythian tribes, the nomadic Scythians themselves also complemented their mobile pastoralism with agriculture.[620]

The settlements in the valley of the Borysthenēs river especially grew wheat, millet, and barley, which grew abundantly thanks to the fertile black soil of the steppe.[281][150] This allowed the Scythians to, in addition of being principally reliant on domesticated animals, also complement their source of food with agriculture,[408] and the Scythian upper classes owned large estates in which large numbers of slaves and members of the tribes subordinate to the Royal Scythians were used to till the land and rear cattle.[605]

Among the tribes subordinate to the nomadic Iranic Scythian, the sedendary Scythian tribes of the Callipidae, Aroteres, Georgoi, and Alizones, engaged in agriculture, and grew crops for their own use as well as to be exported to the Greeks on the northern shores of the Black Sea. These tribes were able to cultivate large quantities of crops thanks to the use of wooden ploughs.[581] The ancient Greek author Herodotus of Halicarnassus recorded that these sedendary Scythian tribes grew wheat, barley, millet, lentils, beans, onions, and garlic; and an oven used to dry grains of wheat, barley, and rye was located at the site of Shyroka Balka, near Pontic Olbia.[581][330]

The Callipidae cultivated crops including wheat and millet, and also engaged in animal husbandry and fishing at sea.[363]

Crafts and materials

Aside from the consumed milk and meat, other parts of the animals reared by the Scythians were used to make skins and wool:[625]

felts made of sheep's wool and sewn sheepskins were used to make caps and tents;

wool, hide, and fur was used to make clothing and blankets;

leather was used to make armour, helmets, trousers, shoes, pendants, velts, and quivers;

horse hair was used to make ropes used to cut animals from the herds and tether, laden, and bridle them;

hemp from cannabis plants was used to make lariats used to herd horses and lassoes used in warfare;[628]

bone was a light and accessible material:

bone was easily worked into many types of tools and ornaments;

bone was also used as fuel because it produced higher temperatures when burnt.

The native sedentary Thracians populations who lived in Scythia manufactured products such as pottery, woodwork, and weaving, as well as bronze metal-working made out of raw materials imported from Transylvania. From this practice of handicraft, the peoples of Scythia obtained simple tools and ornaments, as well as certain types of weapons:[113]

wood was a light, important, and accessible material:

it was easy to work into many types of tools and ornaments, such as spear shafts, arrows, battle-axes, tools, composite bows, ploughs, wagons, tents, and other objects used in daily life;

it was also used as fuel;

wood was obtained from the extensive woodlands on the well-watered lands of the lower Dnipro;[629][37][443]

Metalworking

Main article: Scythian metallurgy

The populations of Scythia practised both metal casting and blacksmithing, with the same craftsmen usually both casting copper and bronze and forging iron:[630][113]

cast bronze bronze and iron were used to produce weapons and heavy tools;

Scythian bronze-working products included:

large bronze semi-spheric cauldrons with truncated cones as their stands, and which were decorated in cast and had either two or four animal-shaped handles on their rims;

socketed bronze finials which were placed at the top of poles and decorated with various animal figures;

The ores from which copper and tin were smelted were likely mined in the region of the Donets Ridge, and metal might also have been imported from the Ural Mountains and the Caucasus. Iron was meanwhile smelted out of bog iron ores obtained from the swampy regions on the lower Dnipro.[630]

The Scythians and the peoples of the Pontic steppe were still Bronze Age societies until the 8th century BC, and it was only after the Scythians had expanded into West Asia that they acquired knowledge of ironworking, which they then brought with them into the Pontic Steppe[207] after they had been expelled from West Asia around c. 600 BC.[347]

Goldsmithing

The Scythians had practised goldsmithing from an early date, with remains from the 2nd Aržan kurgan attesting that the Scythians were already skilled in working gold before their migration out of Central Asia.[68] This tradition of goldsmithing continued until the times of the Pontic Scythian kingdom.[446]

Industrial organisation

The metallurgical workshops which produced the weapons and horse harnesses of the Scythians during the Early Scythian period were located in the forest steppe,[341] with the centre of industry at that time being located in the region of the Tiasmyn group of the Scythian culture, which corresponded the country of the Arotēres, where an Iranic Scythian elite ruled over a sedentary Thracian population.[342]

By the Middle Scythian period, its principal centre was at a site corresponding to present-day Kamianka, where bog iron ores from the Kryvyi Rih region were smelted and forged to produce iron, and various tools, ornaments, and weapons were made: the whole process of manufacturing iron, from the initial smelting to the final forging, were carried out there[309][443] Other metals, such as copper, lead, and zinc were also smelted at Kamianka, while gold- and silversmiths also worked there.[443] This large-scale industrial operation consumed large amounts of timber which was obtained from the river valleys of Scythia, and metalworking might have developed at Kamianka because timber was available nearby.[443]

Kamianka was the location where the Scythian king oversaw metal production on an industrial scale: some of the city's products were used by the Scythian aristocracy itself or offered by them to their dependants and their descendants in exchange for their loyalty;[443] and Kamianka appears to have also been the main supplier of metal items, especially made of iron and bronze, to the Scythian nomads living in the steppes;[421][17] meanwhile, the surplus of the metal was turned into ingots and shipped to Pontic Olbia to be traded.[443]

Textiles

Textiles used to produce Scythian garments included

The Scythians manufactured textiles using spindles,[631] and wool, hemp, ramie, and mixed fibres that were made into cloth through plain, twill and tapestry weaving,[632] while silk appears to have been imported from China.[633]

Trade

The Pontic Scythians practised trade extensively,[309] with the substantial trade relations existed between the Scythians and the Greeks which continued the long-established exchanges of goods between the northern Pontic and Aegean region that had already existed since the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. These trade relations became more intense after the Greeks established colonies on the shores of the Black Sea, as a consequence of which the Scythians engaged in trade with both European and Asian Greece.[433]

The ancient Greeks had first been starting to make expeditions in the Black Sea in the 8th century BC, and encounters with friendly native populations quickly stimulated trade relations and the development of more regular commercial transits.[271] The first Greek colonies of the north coast of the Black Sea attempted to develop trade with its native populations,[277] and therefore they had set up trading enclaves (Ancient Greek: εμπορια, romanized: emporia; Latin: emporia) in the 7th century BC.[280] These colonies were themselves useful for the commercial ventures of their mother cities by acting as markets through which manufactured goods could be exchanged with the native populations in exchange for foodstuffs and rare raw materials such as metals, furs, and slaves brought through the inland trading networks.[276]

The location of the Scythians in the Pontic Steppe had thus placed them in an extremely advantageous position:[98]

to the north, in the forest steppe, lived large settled farmer populations who produced a large variety of highly sought-after commodities such as iron, charcoal, furs, honey, slaves, and grain;

to the south, on the north shore of the Black Sea, were the Greek colonies which were seeking raw materials and manpower for their own use, as well as to export to Greece.

This situation therefore allowed the Scythian kingdom to mediate the thriving trade that the Greek colonies to their south were carrying out with the sedentary peoples of the forest steppe to their north,[17][98] and which was carried out via the large rivers of the Scythian steppe flowing southwards into the Black Sea, which formed the main access routes to these northern markets.[17]

Scythian exports

The Scythians exported iron, grain and slaves to the Greek colonies,[634] and animal products, grain, fish, honey, wax, forest products, furs, skins, wood, horses, cattle, sheep, and slaves[635] to mainland Greece on both sides of the Aegean Sea.[371] Also sold to the Greeks by the Scythians were beavers and beaver-skins, and rare furs that the Scythians had themselves bought from the populations living to their north and east such as the Thyssagetae and Iurcae of the Ural Mountains who hunted rare animals and sewed their skins into clothing.[636]

Other Scythian exports to Greece included various metals smelted from ores and processed into ingots by the Scythians themselves at their industrial centre in their capital city of Kamianka. Ingots of these metals were shipped down the rivers of Scythia till Pontic Olbia, where they were sold to the Greeks.[443]

The Greeks were also especially interested in buying Scythian horses,[637] and in the mid-6th century BC the Greeks started employing Scythian mercenaries in the form of detachments of mounted archers to support their own hoplite armies.[372]

The grain trade

The most important of these export goods was grain, and most especially wheat,[446][579] with the Scythians on the lower Dnipro river cultivating crops principally for export,[579] and the tribes of the Callipidae, Aroteres, Georgoi, and Alizones selling part of their large crop yields to the Greeks; an oven used to dry grain such as wheat, barley, and rye, was located at Shyroka Balka.[579]

Athenian commercial ventures

The importance of the Greek colonies of the north Black Sea coast drastically increased in the later 6th century BC following the Persian Empire's conquest of Egypt, which deprived the states of Greece proper of the Egyptian grain that they depended on.[277] These grain supplies were so important to the city-states of Greece, most especially of the then dominant Greek power of Athens, that this latter city started seeking new locations for producing grain on the north shore of the Black Sea. Therefore, Athens established very well defended new colonies on the north Black Sea coast near the already existing settlements which would act as sites where grain of very good quality was produced to be exported to Athens to feed its citizenry.[370]

Scythian-managed grain trade

The relations between the Scythians and the Greek colonies became more hostile in the early 5th century BC, with the Scythians destroying the Greek cities' khōrai and rural settlements, and therefore their grain-producing hinterlands. The result was that the Scythians instituted an economic policy under their control whereby the sedentary peoples of the forest steppe to their north became the primary producers of grain, which was then transported through the Buh and Dnipro rivers to the Greek cities to their south such as Tyras, Niconium and Pontic Olbia, from where the cities exported it to mainland Greece at a profit for themselves.[17]

The Scythian monopoly over the trade of grain imported from the forest steppe to the Greek cities came to an end sometime between 435 and 400 BC, after which the Greek cities regained their independence and rebuilt their khōrai.[17]

Bosporan grain trade

Beginning in the 5th century BC, the grain trade with Greece was carried out through the intermediary of the Bosporan kingdom, due to which the Scythians expanded their agricultural activities to the areas adjoining the Bosporan Kingdom, including in Crimea,[433] resulting in some of the sedentary Scythian farmers moving into Crimea so as to cultivate their crops in close proximity to these clients.[579] As a consequence of the Peloponnesian War, the Bosporan Kingdom became the main supplier of grain to Greece in the 4th century BC, which resulted in an increase of the trade of grain between the Scythians and the Bosporans.[406]

Scythian profits

The Scythian aristocracy played an important role in this grain trade by becoming the main intermediary in providing grain, obtained both through from the agriculturalist peoples of the forest steppe and cultivation within Scythia itself, to the Bosporan Kingdom.[406][433] The Scythian aristocracy was the main beneficiary of these commercial activities,[433] from which it derived immense revenue[406] and was able to significantly enrich itself,[362] hence why it sought to increase the amount of grain produced in Scythia.[406]

The rich aristocratic burials richly furnished with imported grave goods and gold silver objects, including fine Greek-made toreutics and jewellery, attest of the Scythian aristocracy's economic power derived from the grain trade, due to which the coins minted by Scythian kings at Pontic Olbia were struck with depictions of ears of grain.[433] Scythian commoners did however not obtain any benefits from this trade, and luxury goods were absent from their tombs.[406]

Inscriptions from the Greek cities on the northern Black Sea coast also show that upper class Greek families also derived wealth from this trade,[433] and as a consequence of these flourishing trade relations, which were themselves possible only thanks to the protection and cooperation of the Scythian kings, the Greek colonies on the northern shores of the Black Sea rapidly grew during the 6th century BC.[362]

The slave trade

An Attic vase-painting of a Scythian archer (a police force in Athens) by Epiktetos, 520–500 BC

In the 5th century, the Greek cities in the Aegean Sea had started to import slaves from Scythia immediately after the end of the Persian invasions of Greece. Although Scythian society was not heavily dependent on slaves, unlike the Greeks, the Scythian aristocrats nonetheless still found it profitable to organise raids in the forest steppe to obtain slaves, who were then brought to Pontic Olbia, where they were sold to Greek merchants.[433][427]

The Scythians also sold slaves to the Greeks, with the slaves to be sold being acquired from neighbouring or subordinate tribes during military campaigns,[605] and the Greek colonies on the northern Black Sea coast being hubs of slave trafficking. After the Greek city-state of Athens had defeated the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC, it bought 300 Scythian slave archers who acted as a police force in the city and who lived in tents. When the Greek city of Mytilene broke away from the Delian League in 428 BC, it also bought a similar force of Scythian warriors.[638][639][608]

Scythian imports

Beginning in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, the Scythians had been importing craft goods and luxuries such as vessels, decorations made from previous metals, bronze items, personal ornaments, gold and silver vases, black burnished pottery, carved semi-precious and gem stones, wines, fabrics, oil, and offensive and defensive weapons made in the workshops of Pontic Olbia or in mainland Greece, as well as pottery made by the Greeks of the Aegean islands.[640]

The Scythians also imported large amounts of Scythian-type precious metal items decorated in the "Animal-style" type of art made mainly by Greek craftsmen in the Greek colonies.[446]

Among the Greek colonies, the Pontic Olbia served the demands of the Scythian aristocracy of the Borysthenēs river valley, and Pantikapaion supplied the Scythian aristocrats in the Tauric and Sindic Chersoneses,[150] although Pontic Olbia started declining in the late 5th century BC due to most of the trade passing through it then shifting to transiting through the cities of the Cimmerian Bosporus constituting the Bosporan Kingdom.[435]

Importation of wine

In exchange for their many exports, especially of slaves and metals, to Greece the Scythians bought various Greek products, especially amphorae of wine, and the pottery used to consume said wine, such as oinokhoai and kylikes.[429][427][443] The Scythian aristocrats and royalty residing in the acropolis of the city of Kamianka shipped the surplus of metal produced in that city to Pontic Olbia to be traded in exchange for the wine and fine pottery that they consumed.[443]

The island of Chios in the Aegean Sea, especially, produced wine to be sold to the Scythians, in exchange of which slaves from Scythia were sold in the island's very prominent slave market.[427]

The Scythians also bought olive oil, perfumes, ointments, and other luxury goods from the Greeks,[270][416] such as Scythian-style objects crafted by Greek artisans.[641]

Scythian trade relations

The Pontic Steppe was thus a particularly attractive territory for the Scythians to occupy because it allowed them to obtain grain to supplement their diet from the mixed farmer population of the forest steppe to their north, and exotic luxury goods for their aristocracy to use as status markers from the Greek colonies on the shore of the Black Sea:[94] the Scythian aristocracy especially bought luxury goods which they used flauntingly during their lives and in their tombs as status markers: wine and the various Greek vessels used to mix and drink it were especially imported in large quantities and were even used as grave goods, while craftsmen in the Greek colonies manufactured items made of gold or electrum for Scythian patrons.[308]

Pottery importation

During the earlier Middle Scythian period of the 5th century BC, the Scythians were importing Corinthian and Athenian pottery; and by the later Middle Scythian period of the 4th to 3rd centuries BC the market for Pontic Olbia was limited to a small part of western Scythia, while the rest of the kingdom's importations came from the Bosporan kingdom, especially from Pantikapaion, from where came most of Scythia's imported pottery, as well as richly decorated fine vases, rhyta, and decorative toreutic plaques for gōrytoi.[309]

Hellenisation as consequence of trade

A consequence of the Scythian import of Greek-manufactured art and luxury goods was that Greek art significantly influenced Scythian art and artistic preferences, and, by the Middle and Late Scythian periods, most of the artwork in the Scythian tombs consisted of Scythian motifs and scenes representing Scythian life which had been done by Greek artisans.[362]

The gold trade route

An important trade route existed in Scythia during the Early Scythian period which started in Pontic Olbia and followed the course of the Inhul river and crossed the Dnipro, after which it turned east until the country of the Gelonians and, after crossing the Don and the Volga, passed through the Ural Mountains and continued into Asia until the Altai Mountains.[309][359][446]

Herodotus of Halicarnassus claimed that the Scythians frequently went to the eastern of this route, where they required the use of seven interpreters who knew seven different languages to be able to conduct trade.[309][359]

Gold was traded from eastern Eurasia until Pontic Olbia through this route, and the Scythian tradesmen went to the distant regions on its course to carry out commerce. The conquest of the north Pontic region by the Scythians and their imposition of a "Pax Scythica" created the conditions of safety for traders which enabled the establishment of this route.[642] Olbian-made goods have been found at multiple locations lying on this route till the Ural Mountains.[444]

This trade route was another significant source of revenue for the Scythian rulers,[444] and its location also provided to Pontic Olbia the important position of being a commercial and cultural centre in the northern Pontic region for at least two centuries, and the city itself maintained friendly relations with the populations neighbouring it.[359]

Coinage

Although the Scythians adopted the use of coinage as a method of payment for trade with the Greeks, they never used it for their own domestic market.[643]

Lifestyle

Equestrianism

Being equestrian nomads, the Scythians excelled at horsemanship,[644] with Scythian horses being the most high quality ones in Europe in the time of the Scythians,[446] and Scythian men spent most of their lives on horseback.[576][580]

During the 1st millennium BC, the wet and damp climate prevailing in the Pontic Steppe constituted a propitious environment which caused grass to grow in abundance, in turn allowing the Scythians to rear large herds of[626] a small but very swift breed of horse that they rode directly and also used for drawing carts. Graeco-Roman authors claimed that the Scythians and Sarmatians would castrate their horses because these were otherwise too turbulent to handle.[408]

Saddles

The saddle was invented by the Scythians in the 7th century BC, and consisted of two felt cushions stuffed with stag hair and mounted on felt sweatbands; in some cases, the cushions were attached to wooden saddle frames placed to their back and front.[645] Scythian saddles had four raised bolsters at each corner, which, at a time when the stirrup had not yet been invented, allowed the riders to lean into the forward bolsters and raise themselves without being encumbered by the bouncing of their running horses.[646]

Scythian saddles very colourful and dyed in red, yellow, dark blue, black, and white; they were also wholly decorated with wool, appliqué leather, and felt, as well as wooden carvings decorated in gold leaf.[645]

Nomadism and sedentarisation

The peoples of Scythia consisted of a mix of sedentary farmer populations and nomads,[577][333] with the tribes living in the steppes remaining primarily nomadic and having lifestyles and customs inextricably linked to their nomadic way of life.[580]

During these early periods, the nomadic Scythians did not build settlements, but instead lived in wagons and temporary tents while leading a mobile pastoral life with their herds and wagon trains.[576][647] The dominant tribe of the Royal Scythians, especially, originally led a transhumant pastoralist nomadic way of life[408][74] by spending the summer northwards in the steppes and moving southwards towards the coasts in the winter.[623]

Due to their nomadic lifestyle, the Scythians had many customs in common with other nomads like the Xiongnu, Göktürks and Mongols, such as the wearing of trousers and boots instead of the long flowing clothing of the Mediterranean and Chinese peoples.[116]

With the integration of Scythia with the Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea, the Scythians soon became involved with deepening ties with the already sedentary Greeks, the development of sedentary forms of economy such as cultivating grain, fishing and craftsmanship, as well as the intensification of trade in the more nomadic parts of the Scythian kingdom beginning the 6th century BC,[7][150] due to which some of the nomadic Scythians started to settle down,[150] so that they had already started becoming semi-nomads and sedentary farmers by the 5th century BC[489] during the Middle period,[150] and they had largely become settled farmers by the 3rd century BC.[489]

Habitations

Among the various Scythian tribes, the sedentary farmer tribes lived in western Scythia between the Danube and the Dnipro, while the nomadic pastoralist tribes lived in eastern Scythia between the Dnipro and the Don. Some of these sedentary farmers later moved into Crimea.[579]

Tents

The more nomadic Scythians lived in habitations suited for nomadic lifestyles, such as tents of the same type as the more recent yurt of the Turkic peoples and the ger of the Mongolic peoples that could easily be assembled and disassembled to be transported to different locations, as well as covered wagons that functioned as tents on up to six wheels.[71][648] The walls and floors of these portable habitations were made of felt and the tents themselves were bound together using ropes made from horse hair.[71]

The division of Scythian burial chambers into weapon-arsenals, kitchen areas, stables, and living rooms for the deceased family members and their servants, as well as their furnishings, were modelled on the habitations in which the Scythians dwelt during their lives.[649]

Owing to their nomadic lifestyle, the early Scythians organised their dwellings into wagon trains which were constantly on the move according to the rhythm of their pastoralist movements.[576][647]

Sedentary settlements

Scythian settlements

Beginning in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, the Scythians started building fortified sedentary settlements,[17][442] of which the most important ones were located on major routes which provided access to the major rivers of Scythia,[443] and corresponding to present-day Jelizavetovskaja at the mouth of the Tanais, Trakhtemyriv on the upper Borysthenēs, Nadlimans'ke near the estuary of Tyras, Bilsk [uk] on the Vorskla river,[435] and Kamianka at the confluence of the Borysthenēs and one of its tributaries.[17]

The largest and most important of these was the settlement of Kamianka,[442] built in the late 5th century BC and protected by ramparts and steep banks of the Borysthenēs river.[17] The Kamianka site was the location of the seasonal royal headquarters and the aristocrats and royalty residing in the city's acropolis,[17][443] which contained stone houses[442] and buildings built over stone foundations.[443]

Kamianka was also the location of a city where the Scythian king oversaw metal production on an industrial scale,[448] being therefore the residence of a farmer population and of metalsmiths.[17] The houses of these farmers and metalsmiths were single-storeyed, with gable-rooves, ranged from 40 to 150 metres square in size and could include multiple rooms, and had clay-painted and felt-fabric adorned walls made of beams buried vertically in the ground; Kamianka also contained square pit houses made of pole constructions with recessed surfaces.[452]

Blacksmiths' workshops in Scythian settlements from this time were located in both the ground-level and pit houses, where they formed groups of craftsmen's quarters.[452]

Smaller Scythian settlements also existed, where were cultivated large amounts of crops such as wheat, millet, and barley.[150]

Vehicles

In addition to horse-riding and wagons, the Scythians also used carts which could cover large distances.[442]

Diet

The Scythians ate the meat from the horses, cattle, and sheep they reared.[625][408]

Milk, especially that of mares, was also an important part of the Scythians' diet, and it was both consumed and used to make cheese and an alcoholic drink made from milk similar to the kumys still widely consumed by Eurasian steppe nomads.[408][650]

The Scythians also consumed wheat and millet in the form of a porridge.[150]

The Scythians also supplemented, to varying extents depending on the regions where they lived, their diets by hunting deer, steppe antelopes, beavers, and other wild animals, as well as by fishing from the large rivers flowing through Scythia.[408][630]

Cooking was mainly done in cauldrons[651] and over fires using dried dung as fuel.[556]

Wine consumption

In addition to these, the Scythians consumed large amounts of wine, which they bought from the Greeks. Unlike the Greeks, who diluted wine with water before drinking it, the Scythians drank it undiluted, due to which undiluted wine was called "Scythian-style wine" among the Greeks,[429] who also equated the drinking of wine "in the Scythian way" with immoderate and unrestrained binge drinking.[652]

During the earlier phase of the Scythian Pontic kingdom, wine was primarily consumed by the aristocracy, and its consumption became more prevalent among the wealthier members of the populace only after the 5th century BC.[580]

Clothing and grooming

Main article: Scythian clothing

Kul-Oba vase

Scythian warriors, drawn after figures on an electrum cup from the Kul-Oba kurgan burial near Kerch, Crimea. The warrior on the right strings his bow, bracing it behind his knee; note the typical pointed hood, long jacket with fur or fleece trimming at the edges, decorated trousers, and short boots tied at the ankle. Scythians apparently wore their hair long and loose, and all adult men apparently bearded. The gōrytos appears clearly on the left hip of the bare-headed spearman. The shield of the central figure may be made of plain leather over a wooden or wicker base. (Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg).

Scythian garments were sewn together from several pieces of cloth, and generally did not require the use of fibulae to be held in place, unlike the clothing of other ancient European peoples.[653] Scythian dress consisted of combination of various leathers and furs designed for efficiency and comfort on horseback, and was expensively and richly decorated with brightly coloured embroidery and applique work as well as facings of pearl and gold.[654]

The Scythians wore clothing typical of the steppe nomads, which tended to be soft, warm, and close-fitting, made from wool and leather and fur and felts, and decorated with appliquéd and golden ornaments:[655]

the clothing of Scythian men consisted of:

long-sleeved jacket made of embroidered leather;

these jackets were belted and had lapels on the chest, trimmed with fur at the edges;

the jackets also possessed long flaps at their bottom that would have waved up and down during horse riding;

long and wide trousers (called šarabāra in the Scythian language[656][657]) that could be either narrow or wide;

Scythian trousers were elaborately decorated with patterned textiles and appliqués;

the jackets and trousers were decorated with curved lines and other patterns and trimmed with decorated strips along the seams;

half-boots into which the trousers were tucked or ankle-boots;

the boots were either tied to the feet with narrow laces under the ankle or around the foot itself;

Scythian men wore pointed caps with flaps on the side and on the back that could be tied at the front during earlier periods;[658]

Scythian men went bareheaded in later times.

Scythian women wore:[659]

shoes or short boots;

long dresses that could be pleated or have furbelows on the lower edges;

mantles;

the dresses and mantles were decorated with triangular or round metallic plates, which were made of gold for wealthier women and of bronze for poorer women;

women belonging to the upper classes wore:

kandus cloaks over their dresses;

tall headdresses whose shapes ranged from simple diadems to close-fitting caps to 30 cm-high kalathoi-shaped hats;

a veil over their head.

Scythian dress was brightly coloured using resist painting and embroidery, and was decorated with gold appliqués sewn into the clothing.[660]

Scythians wore jewellery usually made of gold, but sometimes also of bronze:[661][662]

both men and women wore:

earrings;

bracelets made of silver and bronze wire;

neck rings and torcs made of gold with animal figure-shaped or animal head-shaped terminals;

torcs were especially worn by members of the warrior aristocracy and was a necessary attribute of this class;[202]

necklaces made of gold beads and various imported semi-precious stones;

Scythian women wore:

earrings;

elaborate torcs;

rings of various shapes;

gold bangles;

bracelets of pearls and other materials.

Hairstyle

Scythian men grew their hair long and their beards to significant sizes.[663][576][337] Nothing is known about the hairstyles of Scythian women.[662]

Grooming

The Scythians were acquainted with the use of soap, which they used to wash their heads.[628]

According to Herodotus of Halicarnassus, Scythian men however did not wash their bodies with water, and instead cleaned themselves in a steam bath in a small tent where the flower buds of cannabis were thrown on hot stones to induce intoxication.[664][665]

Scythian women meanwhile used to clean and beautify themselves by using a paste made from the wood of cypress and cedar, ground together with frankincense, and water on a stone until it acquired a thick consistency. The women then applied this paste over themselves and removed it after a day, leaving their skin clean, glossy, and sweet-smelling.[643][666][667] Scythian women also used cosmetics such as scented water and various ointments.[662]

These cleaning practices were especially performed after funerals.[666]

Scythian men and women both used mirrors, and bronze mirrors made in Pontic Olbia and whose handles were decorated with animal figures such as those of stags, panthers, and rams, were popular during the early Scythian periods.[668][662]

Medicine

A group of Scythian shaman-priests called the Agaroi (Αγαροι, Latin: Agari) was knowledgeable in the use of snake venom for medicinal purposes.[669][670] During the Third Mithridatic War, these Agaroi used snake venom to stop a thigh wound received by Mithridates VI of Pontus from haemorrhaging.[671]

Cannabis was used by the Scythians as a way to relieve pain from daily activities, arthritis, and constant warfare.[672]

The Scythians applied the oil of wild cabbage, which has analgesic, circulation-stimulating, and anti-bacterial properties, on their bodies to help them withstand the cold in winter and to repel insects in the summer.[673]

The paste made of cypress and cedar wood, frankincense, and water used by Scythian women to clean themselves also had medicinal properties since cedar and cypress oil and frankincense possess antiseptic properties useful for fighting infection, with cedar and cypress oil also being astringents capable of ameliorating oily and flaky skin and treat acne and dermatitis, while frankincense has anti-inflammatory, anti-anxiety, and anti-depressant properties.[672]

In addition to human medicine, the Scythians were adept at veterinary medicine and were especially knowledgeable in treating the health problems of their horses.[674]

Pets

The Scythians had domestic dogs.[606]

Art

Literary art

The Scythians might have had bards who composed and recited oral poetry.[651]

Physical art

Main article: Scytho-Siberian art § Pontic Scythian art

Gold pectoral, or neckpiece, from an aristocratic kurgan in Tovsta Mohyla, Pokrov, Ukraine, dated to the second half of the 4th century BC, of Greek workmanship. The central lower tier shows three horses, each being torn apart by two griffins. Scythian art was especially focused on animal figures.

The "Animal Style"

The art of the Scythians was part of specific zoomorphic style called the "Animal Style," which was typical of the Eurasian steppe nomads and represented a limited and specific range of animals in very specific canonical poses.[17]

Development

The "Animal Style" art of the Scythians was a variant of the art of the Eurasian Steppe nomads, which itself initially developed in eastern Eurasian steppes of Central Asia and Siberia during the 9th century BC[49] under the partial influence of ancient Chinese art[17] and of the "static" naturalistic art of the inhabitants of the Siberian woodlands,[198] after which it arrived westward into eastern Europe during the 8th century BC.[17]

The distinctive style of art characteristic of the Scythians proper emerged during their stay in Western Asia during the 7th century BC,[675] and especially during their occupation of Media, when the Scythian upper class came under the influence of West Asian culture,[198] as a consequence of which the art of the Scythians absorbed many West Asian motifs and themes.[102]

Beginning in the 5th century BC, Scythian art experienced the influence of arriving Sauromatians from the east,[17] the borrowing of elements from Thracian art[198] as well as the incorporation of elements from Greek[334][153][17] and Achaemenid Persian art.[17]

This Scythian art formed out of various influences later spread to the west, in the region which corresponds to present Romania, and eventually it brought influences from Iranic and West Asian art into Celtic art,[334] and also introduced metalwork types which followed Shang Chinese models, such as "cruciform tubes" used in harnesses, into Western Eurasia, where they were adopted by the Hallstatt culture.[347]

Scythian art stopped existing after the end of the Pontic Scythian kingdom in the early 3rd century BC, and the art of the later Scythians of Crimea and Dobruja was completely Hellenised, with their paintings and sculptures belonging to the Greek artistic tradition and having probably been made by Greek sculptors.[17]

Religion

Main article: Scythian religion

The religion of the Scythians was a variant of the Pre-Zoroastrian Iranic religion which differed from Zoroastrian and the post-Zoroastrian Iranic religions, and instead belonged to a more archaic stage of Indo-Iranic religious development than the Zoroastrian and Hindu systems.[676] The use of cannabis to induce trance and divination by soothsayers was a characteristic of the Scythian belief system.[676]

Unlike the Persians and the Medes, the Iranic peoples of the steppe such as the Scythians and the Sarmatians were not affected by the Zoroastrian reforms of ancient Iranic religion.[576]

Within the Scythian religion there existed a genealogical myth which the Scythian kings used as justification for their divine right to rule.[619]

Warfare

Scythian warriors (reconstruction)

The Scythians were a people with a strong warrior culture,[677] and fighting was one of the main occupations of Scythian men, so that war constituted a sort of national industry for the Scythians, and was especially one through which they could meet their society's demands and their aristocracy could obtain luxuries.[678] Scythian men were all trained in war exercises and in archery from a young age,[580] hence why the furnishings of Scythian burial chambers included weapons, thus reflecting the martial nature of their society which was made of mounted warriors.[649] The Aroteres were an especially war-like Scythian tribe.[679][680]

However, the mostly small number of depictions of warfare compared to the larger number of representations of peaceful pastoralist activities in Scythian petroglyphic art suggests that the war-like tendencies of the Scythians might have been exaggerated by Herodotus of Halicarnassus and the modern authors who drew on him as a source.[71]

Weapons

The Scythians used weapons made from cast iron and bronze.[71]

Archery

Mounted archery was the main form of Scythian warfare.[646] Scythian saddles had four raised bolsters at each corner, which, at a time when the stirrup had not yet been invented, allowed the riders to lean into the forward bolsters and raise themselves so they could use shoot their arrows from horseback. This type of saddle preserved the mounted archer from the bouncing of the running horses, thus allowing Scythian mounted archers to operate at very high performance levels.[646]

Scythian archers using the Scythian bow, Kerch (ancient Panticapeum), Crimea, 4th century BC. The Scythians were skilled archers whose style of archery influenced that of the Persians and subsequently other nations, including the Greeks.[446][681]

Scythian bronze arrowheads, c700-300 BC

The main Scythian armament were the bow and arrows:[682]

the typical weapon of the Scythians was the very recurved or reflex composite bow that was easy to use for mounted warriors. Scythian bows were the most complex composite bows in both their recurved profiles and their cross-sections, highly engineered and made from wood, horn, sinew, and sturgeon fish glue through laborious craftsmanship, and were capable of delivering military draw weights;:[446][683][684]

although the shape of Scythian arrows changed with time, they maintained a basic structure. Scythian arrows had shafts made of reed or birch wood, with arrowheads mostly of bronze, and more rarely iron and bone.[446][685][686]

Scythian trilobate arrowheads possessed propeller twists that made them spin, thus making them more aerodynamically efficient;

Scythian arrows sometimes made with a single barb on one side: these caused star wounds that were more difficult to sew together, therefore increasing the risk of haemorrhage among those shot, which terrorised those who received such wounds;

arrowheads were likely fitted on detachable foreshafts, ensuring the arrowheads remained in the body thanks to the detachability of the foreshafts, which made them especially useful when using poisoned arrows;

the shape of Scythian bows and the shape of their bronze arrowheads made them the most powerful firing weapon of their time, due to which they were adopted by West Asian armies in the 7nd century BC.[17][306]

When not used, Scythian bows and arrows were kept in a combined quiver-bowcase called a gōrytos which was made of leather or bark and was decorated with gold or bronze plates and could each contain up to 300 arrows. Unlike quivers that were set at the right hip among all other cultures, Scythian gōrytoi were hanged from belts at the left hip, with the arrowd being usually taken from the gōrytoi using the bow hand and drawn on the bowstring using the right hand, although the Scythians were skilled at ambidextrous archery.[669][687][688]

Scythian bows and arrows might have required the use of thumb rings to be drawn, although none have been found yet, possibly because hey might have been made of perishable materials.[689]

Poisons

The Scythians coated their arrows with a potent poison referred to in Greek as skythikon (Ancient Greek: σκυθικον, romanized: skuthikon). To prepare this poison, the Scythians captured small adders that had recently given birth, which they left to decompose, while the Scythian priests filled leather bags with human blood and buried them in dung to putrefy it, after which they mixed decomposed matter in the blood with the decomposed remains of the snakes.[669][690][691]

In addition to the snakes' venom retaining its effect in their decomposed bodies, the human blood was propitious for the growth of bacterial populations such as tetanus- and gangrene-causing germs from the dung. Thus, if an individual initially survived being shot with a poisoned Scythian arrow, they would still experience the effects of the snake poison, including the disintegration of blood cells, shock, and respiratory paralysis, with the gangrening of the wound starting the next day, followed by tetanus after around a week.[669]

The skythikon was crafted to cause lasting harm so that even the most minor wounds from arrows coated with it had a high likeliness to be lethal,[669] and the unlikely possible survivors of skythikon poisoning would have been incapacitated for life.[692] The skythikon was used only against human enemies and was not used for hunting since the meat of animals contaminated with the toxins would not have been proper for consumption.[693]

The stench of the skythikon-coated arrows also functioned as stench weapons because the near-unanimous revulsion by human cultures for smell of rotting and faeces, and the belief in ancient periods that such foul miasmas caused disease.[690]

The skythikon was also referred to in Greek as toxikon pharmakon (Ancient Greek: τοξικον φαρμακον), meaning lit. 'poison for arrows'. The adjective toxikon (τοξικον), meaning lit. 'of the bow', was borrowed into Latin as toxicum, to which the meaning of the Greek term pharmakon (φαρμακον), meaning lit. 'poison' was transferred. From Latin toxicum is derived the modern word toxic, referring to something poisonous.[694][695]

Another poison used by the Scythians to coat their arrows was hemlock.[669]

The shafts and foreshafts of Scythian poisoned arrows were painted with zigzag and diamond patterns emulating the scaly designs of snake skins.[671][696]

Other weapons

In addition to the bow and arrow, the Scythians also used weapons such as:[668][687][17]

iron spears measuring between 1.70 and 2.20 metres long with bay leaf-shaped spearheads that sometimes had a ferrule at the bottom;

long swords in the early period;

50 to 70 centimetre-short iron swords and daggers called akīnakēs:

although considered "typically Scythian" weapons, the akīnakai had been borrowed by the Scythians from Transcaucasian peoples, more specifically from Georgian Bronze Age weaponry.

bimetallic pickaxes, called sagaris, made of an iron blade and a bronze socket;

shaft-hole war-axes;

pole-axes;[697]

other sorts of battle-axes;

lances;

darts;

lassoes;

and slings.

Armour

Some Scythian warriors wore rich protective armour and belts made of metal plates,[661] including:[698]

commoner warriors used leather or hide armour;

aristocrats used scale armour made of scales of bone, bronze, and iron sewn onto leather along the top edge;

scale armour had been borrowed by the Scythians from the peoples of West Asia during the 7th century BC and then made into a prevalent aspect of the Scythian culture of the northern Pontic region;

scale armour was also used to protect horses, especially in the chest area;

sometimes, instead of armour, the Scythians used composite battle-belts, which were made of scales sewn onto wide strips of either iron sheet, hide, or leather;

Golden decorative plate shaped like a stag from a Scythian shield

Golden decorative plate shaped like a panther from a Scythian shield

helmets:

cast bronze helmets with an opening for the face, called of the "Kuban type," were made by the native Caucasian peoples in the 6th and early 5th centuries BC for Scythians;

Greek-made Attic, Corinthian, Chalcidic, and Thracian helmets replaced the Caucasian-made "Kuban type" helmets in the 6th century BC;

composite scale helmets made of iron or bronze plates started being used in the later 6th century BC;

Greek-made greaves were imported from the 5th century BC.

The Scythians used locally-made small hide or wicker or wooden shields reinforced with iron strips, with the shields of Scythian aristocrats often being decorated with decorative central plaques.[668][697][699]

Command structure

The high king had the supreme authority over the armies of the Royal Scythians and their subordinate tribes; the local lords were in charge of the army of a nome; the heads of clans were in charge of war bands.[700]

The nomes of the Scythian kingdom were in charge of spreading information about the war at the time of the Persian invasion of Scythia.[409]

Mounted archery was the mode of fighting of the free commoners of Scythia, who were called hippotoxotai (Ancient Greek: ιπποτοξοται, lit. 'horse-archers'[669]) in Greek.[646][608]

Serfs and slaves were subordinate to the warriors and accompanied them unarmed, and would be armed with spears only in extremely severe situations.[608]

Tactics

The Scythians fought in mass formations of mounted archers and were adept at using feigned flight tactics.[446]

War customs

The Scythians had several war-related customs meant to transfer the power of defeated enemies to Scythian warriors:[701][702]

every Scythian warrior would drink the blood of the first enemy they would kill;

the Scythians would collect the severed heads of their enemies and bring them to their king;

the war spoils would be divided among the warriors depending on the number of heads they brought;

it was also on the number of severed heads that a warrior had brought to the king that depended the rank of honour given on the warriors at the annual ceremony where the local lords of the nomes would pour wine into a large vessel for the warriors who had been successful in battle by killing at least one enemy;

it was considered the worst disgrace possibly by the Scythians to sit to one side due to having killed no enemies;

the heads of enemies were scalped, and the scalps themselves were tanned and used as:

decorative handkerchiefs tied to the bridles of horses;

as towels to be shown off;

the ancient Greeks associated the practice of scalping so closely with the Scythians that they used the term aposkuthizein (αποσκυθιζειν), literally meaning "to Scythianise away," as name for scalping;

the Scythians would fashion the tops of their enemies' skulls into drinking bowls which were covered in leather, and would be gilded on the inside if they belonged to rich Scythians;

this custom was likely derived from the belief that this was a way of absorbing the power of an enemy;

the corpses of enemies would be flayed, after which the skin would be tanned, and the warriors would:

either stretch them on wooden frames and carried by the warriors;

or made into saddles;

the skin and fingernails from the enemies' right hands was used to make gōrytoi.[703]

Physical appearance

The Scythians looked similar to the populations of Europe,[704][699] and depictions of Scythian men in Persian sculptures and on Scythian gold objects show them as stocky and powerfully built, with strong facial features and long and thick wavy hair.[7]

Upper class Scythians were particularly tall, with the men usually being over 1.80 metres tall, and sometimes reaching 1.90 metres, and on some rarer occasions being even more than 2 metres tall.[705]

The difference in height between these upper class Scythians and the Scythian commoners was of around 10 to 15 centimetres, with the height difference being a symbol of status among the upper-class men. Analysis of skeletons shows that Scythians had longer arm and leg bones and stronger bone formation than present-day people living in their former territories.[705]

Due to his unfamiliarity with Scythian dress, Pseudo-Hippocrates inaccurately claimed that the Scythians suffered from hypermobility of the joints.[654]

In Histories, the 5th-century BC Greek historian Herodotus describes the Budini of Scythia as red-haired and grey-eyed.[706] In the 5th century BC, Greek physician Hippocrates argued that the Scythians were light skinned.[706] In the 3rd century BC, the Greek poet Callimachus described the Arismapes (Arimaspi) of Scythia as fair-haired.[706] The 2nd-century BC Han Chinese envoy Zhang Qian described the Sai (Saka), an eastern people closely related to the Scythians, as having yellow (probably meaning hazel or green) and blue eyes.[706] In the late 2nd century AD, the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria says that the Scythians and the Celts have long auburn hair.[706] The 2nd-century Greek philosopher Polemon includes the Scythians among the northern peoples characterised by red hair and blue-grey eyes.[706] In the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD, the Greek physician Galen writes that Scythians, Sarmatians, Illyrians, Germanic peoples and other northern peoples have reddish hair.[706] The fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa wrote that the Scythians were fair skinned and blond haired. The 5th-century physician Adamantius, who often followed Polemon, describes the Scythians as fair-haired.[706]

Archaeology

Main article: Scythian culture

Scythian defence line 339 BC reconstruction in Polgár, Hungary

Scythian archaeology can be divided into three stages:[328][17]

Early Scythian – from the mid-8th or the late 7th century BC to c. 500 BC

Classical Scythian or Mid-Scythian – from c. 500 BC to c. 300 BC

Late Scythian – from c. 200 BC to the mid-3rd century AD, in the Crimea and the Lower Dnipro, by which time the population was settled.

Archaeological remains of the Scythians include barrow grave tombs called "kurgans" (ranging from simple exemplars to elaborate "Royal kurgans" containing the "Scythian triad" of weapons, horse-harness, and Scythian-style wild-animal art), gold, silk, and animal sacrifices, in places also with suspected human sacrifices.[707][535]

Mummification techniques and permafrost have aided in the relative preservation of some remains. Scythian archaeology also examines the remains of cities and fortifications.[708][709][710]

Genetics

Approximate genetic makeup of different Scythian groups

Main article: Scytho-Siberian world § Genetics

The Scythians (specifically Western or Pontic Scythians, as in differentiation from Eastern Scythian Saka) primarily emerged from the Bronze and Iron Age population of the Pontic-Caspian and Central Asian Steppe (Western Steppe Herders or "Steppe\_MLBA") associated with the Andronovo culture.[711][32] The (Western or Pontic) Scythians (such as Sarmatians) fall in or close to the European-related cluster, while Eastern Scythians (such as the Pazyryk culture) are more heterogeneous, both genetically and culturally.[712]

Maternal haplogroups

Western Scythians carried diverse West Eurasian and East Eurasian maternal lineages. Initially, the Western Scythians carried only West Eurasian maternal haplogroups, however the frequency of East Eurasian haplogroups rises to 26% in samples dated from the 6th-2nd centuries BCE.[713] Among the Western Scythians discovered at Rostov-on-Don, in European Russia, East Eurasian maternal haplogroups make up 37.5% of the total. These results suggest that there was increasing marriages to women of East Eurasian origin among the Western Scythians.[714] The East Eurasian maternal lineages were likely brought by individuals sharing affinities with modern-day Nganasan people, as well as the ancient Okunevo culture.[715]

Paternal haplogroups

Scythians living in the steppes near the Seversky-Donets River had haplogroup R1a, while Scythians living near the Dniester River had haplogroups R1b, E1b and I2a. Those Scythians living in the forest-steppes west of the Dnieper had haplogroups R1a, R1b and J2a, while Scythians near the Seversky-Donets River had haplogroups R1a and Q1b.[716] [717][712]

List of rulers

The relationships of the various Scythian kings with each other are not known for certain, although the historian and anthropologist Anatoly Khazanov suggests that the Scythians had been ruled by the same dynasty from the time of their stay in West Asia until the end of their kingdom in the Pontic steppe, and that Madyes and the later Scythian kings Spargapeithes and Ariapeithes belonged to the same dynasty,[617] and Ellis Minns suggested in 1913 that Idanthyrsus was probably the father of Ariapeithes.[718]

Meanwhile, the scholar Askold Ivantchik instead considers Madyes, Spargapeithes, and Ariapeithes to have each belonged to a different dynasty.[17]

Kings of Early Scythians

Išpakāya (Scythian: \*Spakāya[719]), r. unknown – 679 BC

Bartatua (Scythian: \*Pr̥ϑutavah[720] or \*Pr̥tatavah[721]), r. 679 – c. 665 BC

Madyes (Median: \*Mādava[722]), r. c. 650 – 625 BC

Kings of Pontic Scythians

Spargapeithes (Scythian: \*Spargapaiϑah[723]), r. c. 610 BC[724]

Lykos (Scythian: \*Lū̆ka[725]), r. c. 600 BC[724]

Gnouros, r. c. 575 BC[724]

Sauaios or Saulios, r. c. 550 BC[724]

Idanthyrsus (Scythian: \*Hiϑāmϑrauša[726]), r. c. 530 – c. 510 BC[724]

Sub-kings:

Scopasis, r. c. 513 BC

Taxacis (Scythian: \*Taxšaka[727]), r. c. 513 BC

Argotas ?, r. c. 510 – c. 490 BC[724]

Ariapeithes (Scythian: \*Aryapaiϑah[728]), r. c. 490 – c. 460 BC[724]

Scyles (Scythian: \*Skula[17]), r. c. 460 – c. 450 BC[724]

Octamasadas (Scythian: \*Uxtamazatā[729]), r. c. 450 – c. 430 BC[724]

Eminakes ? (Scythian: \*Aminaka[730]), r. c. 420 BC ?

Ateas or Ataias (Scythian: \*Haϑaiya[731][732]), r. c. 360s – 339 BC

king with unrecorded name, r. c. 325 BC[724]

Agaros, r. c. 310 BC[724]