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ANCIENT IRANIAN NOMADS IN WESTERN CENTRAL ASIA*

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Contents

THE territory of Central Asia, which consists of vast expanses of steppe-land, desert and semi-desert with fine seasonal pastures, was destined by nature for the development of nomadic cattle-breeding. Between the seventh and third centuries B.C. it was inhabited by a large number of tribes, called Scythians by the Greeks, and Sakas by the Persians.

The history of the Central Asian nomads is inseparable from that of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe zone. Their political and economic life was closely linked, and their material culture had much in common. It should also be noted that, despite their distinctive qualities, the nomadic tribes were closely connected with the agricultural population of Central Asia. In fact, the history and movements of these nomadic tribes and the settled population cannot be considered in isolation; each had its impact on the other, and this interdependence must be properly understood.

* See Map 1.

Literary sources on the ancient Iranian nomads of Central Asia

The term 'Tūra'[1] is the name by which the Central Asian nomadic tribes were in one of the earliest parts of the *Avesta*. The Tūras are portrayed as enemies of the sedentary Iranians and described, in *Yašt* XVII (prayer to the goddess Aši), 55–6, as possessing fleet-footed horses.[2] As early as 641 or 640 B.C. the nomads were known in Assyrian sources as the Sakas.[3]

Many Greek writers referred to all the nomads of Eurasia, including those of Central Asia, as Scythians; and the Persians designated all the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes, including the Scythians, as the Sakas. These broad classifications were based on the similarity of the culture and way of life of all the nomads who spoke Iranian languages. The question of the actual distribution of the different nomadic tribes or tribal groups is debatable, largely because of the dearth of written sources. Moreover, it is well to remember that nomadic life characteristically entailed frequent migrations, with the result that different tribes successively occupied one and the same territory. When it is considered that these tribes were culturally very close to one another it is easy to understand why classical writers sometimes associated different tribes with the same historical events. For example, in their description of Cyrus' war against the Central Asian nomads, Cyrus fought against the Massagetae according to Herodotus; against the Sakas according to Strabo; against the Abiae according to Quintus Curtius; against the Derbices according to Ctesias; and against the Dahae according to Berossus.

It is now generally agreed that the ancient nomads of Central Asia were descendants of the Bronze Age cattle-breeding tribes who had inhabited the same territory, [4] which does not exclude, however, the probability of considerable ethnic intermingling and movement within and beyond the borders of the region. These trends must have become particularly marked at the start of the first millennium B.C., when a number of tribes changed from cattle-breeding to a purely nomadic way of life.

This view is confirmed by anthropological studies. Between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C., the Sakas of the Aral Sea region seem to have a mixed population, consisting of a Europoid, mainly Andronovo stratum with a significant admixture of Mongoloid

[1] Litvinsky, 1972. p. 156.

[2] The mention of the Tūras' fleet-footed horses is possibly a hint at their link with the territory of Turkmenistan, which from time immemorial was famous for its splendid swift horses, the ancestors of the present-day Turkmen breeds (*Istoriya Turkmenskoy SSR*, 1957, p. 104).

[3] Litvinsky, 1972, pp. 156–7.

[4] See Volume I, Chapters 14 and 15.

forms of Central Asian origin. Anthropological materials of the Saka period from eastern Kazakhstan are heterogeneous, showing genetic similarities with the population of the T'ien Shan and the Altai mountains with a Mongoloid admixture already apparent. The Sakas of the eastern Pamirs occupied a place apart, among the other Saka tribes or those akin to them.[5]

The question of the distribution of the Saka tribes is extremely complex. Current literature presents the most varied and contradictory points of view, due principally to the paucity of written sources. The location of the different tribes can only be determined from the extant archaeological data, and any picture of the distribution of the Central Asian tribes belonging to the Saka-Massagetae community remains tentative and incomplete. The Naqsh-i Rustam inscription of Darius I lists three Saka tribal confederations: (a) the *Sakā Haumavargā* in Ferghana, where they began to change over to a settled form of life; (b) the *Sakā Tigraxaudā* in the region beyond the Syr Darya and in Semirechye; and (c) the *Saka tayaiy paradraya* or European Sakas (Scythians). In his list of Darius' satrapies, Herodotus also mentions the Caspians and Sacae as belonging to the fifteenth province. They are usually located along the southern and eastern shores of the Caspian Sea up to the mouth of the now-dried-up Uzboi. It is possible that the Dahae and a number of the other groupings of the Hellenistic period may have derived from the earlier Massagetian Confederation.

No kurgans or burial mounds of the Scythian period (seventh-fifth centuries B.C.) on the Uzboi are known so far, though the association of the Massagetae with the area seems to be well founded.[6] The kurgans that have been investigated (dating from the fourth-second centuries B.C.) show that they are connected with Massagetian tribal groups of a later period, perhaps the Dahae. Their material culture is unquestionably of local origin and contains elements common to the Prokhorovo culture of the lower Volga and Ural regions.

Society and economy of the Iranian nomads of Central Asia

The eighth to sixth centuries B.C. witnessed the development of a class society both among the nomadic tribes and in the settled oases. The development of a specialized nomadic cattle-breeding economy obviously led to major economic and social changes, though the written sources throw little light on the social and economic relationships that existed

[5] Litvinsky, 1972, p. 184.
[6] P'yankov, 1964, 1972; Yusupov, 1976.

among the ancient nomads. The transition to a nomadic way of life in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. occurred at much the same time over the whole of the Central Asian and southern Russian steppes, which were then populated by nomadic tribes showing many similarities in material culture, customs and mores. A nomadic cattle-breeding economy, in which cattle were put to pasture on a succession of different grazing grounds, led to a sharp increase in the number of cattle. This, in turn, led to more tribes shifting to a nomadic way of life. The basis of their prosperity lay in their large herds; horses now began to play a greater role; tribes living on the banks of the rivers engaged in fishing; and skilled craftsmen produced arms, ornaments, sumptuous carpets and other objects.[7] The only indication of the political system of administration operating among the nomads is the mention made of the Saka-Massagetian kings, who were identified with the leaders of the nomadic confederations. The fact that these confederations constituted an organized military force provides justification for speaking of an aristocracy in contrast to the rank-and-file of free nomads.

There may also have been slaves among the nomads, but they clearly did not take any significant part in productive life. The range of grave goods found in barrows also provides evidence for the existence of social differentiation among the Central Asian nomads. In some regions such differences are particularly marked in barrows from the Late Bronze Age, which contained basic types of arms, horse-harness fittings and artefacts typical of the time. Still more striking evidence of social differentiation is to be seen in the very rich mausoleum complexes of leaders – in the Tagisken and Uygarak cemeteries on the lower reaches of the Syr Darya, [8] in the Chilik kurgan, the barrows in central Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and the huge royal sepulchre of Arzhan.[9] Judging from the fact that, during this period, there was a shift from large burial mounds to smaller clusters of kurgans, we may presume that changes of some sort occurred in the family and tribal structure of nomad society.

Most scholars believe that the social organization of the steppe tribes was based on a clan and tribe structure. Based mainly on data in classical authors, this conclusion is confirmed by archaeological material – barrows in the steppe belt are usually sited in separate groups, representing the burial grounds of members of different clans. By this stage, however, the original equality of the steppe societies had already been lost, and there were considerable social and property distinctions.

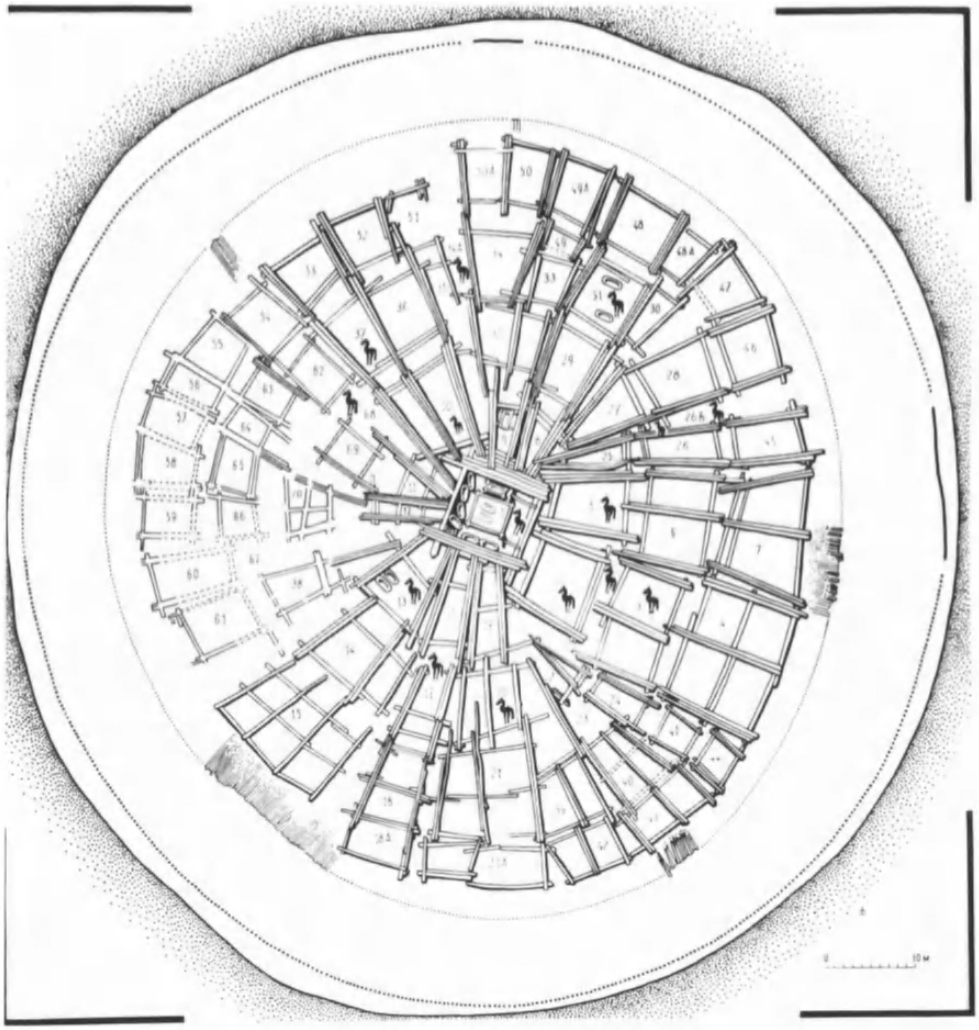
[7] *Istoriya Turkmenskoy SSR*, 1957, p. 69.
[8] Vishnevskaya, 1973; Vishnevskaya and Itina, 1971; Itina, 1981.
[9] Gryaznov, 1975.

The burial complexes of ordinary herdsmen are found under small earthen or stone mounds, whereas grandiose structures, sometimes as high as 20 m, were erected over members of the tribal aristocracy. Complex burial structures have been found in tombs of nobles, with different layouts in different parts of the steppe zone. Among the European Scythians they normally took the form of deep complex catacombs with several chambers. In Semirechye and the Altai regions, the excavated graves of aristocrats contain monumental timber tombs. Thus, in the Besshatîr burial ground in the Ili river valley, log-built burial vaults were found, consisting of three parts: a corridor, an antechamber and the burial chamber proper. The walls rose to a height of 4 m and were built of horizontal trunks of Schrenk spruce, strengthened by timber uprights dug into the ground. [10]

A large number of people must have been employed to erect these complex structures. Obviously the persons buried in them were the chiefs of large tribes or even tribal confederations. The Arzhan tumulus (Fig. 1), already mentioned, is of interest in this connection. Its stone-built mound, 120 m in diameter, covered a timber burial structure consisting of seventy radially arranged chambers. In the central chamber the leader and his close companions were buried, while the other chambers held the remains of representatives of subject tribes and possibly the offerings of friendly tribal groups. Each of the burials was accompanied by many different articles, but a considerable proportion of these were unfortunately plundered in antiquity. It has been calculated that about 160 saddle horses were buried in the kurgan and another 300 horses eaten at the funeral feast.[11]

Social differentiations between steppe tribes of the Scythian period are also mentioned by classical authors. For instance, Lucian states that the Pontic Scythians were divided into a royal clan, *pilophoroi* thought to be members of the military aristocracy or priests and the 'eight-legged ones' – ordinary herdsmen with a pair of oxen and a cart. Some believe that this division corresponds to the division of society into three class or caste groups that characterized all the ancient Indo-Iranians. [12] A similar division can also be traced in the distribution of graves in archaeological sites, for example, in the Saka burial ground at Uygarak on the lower Syr Darya. [13] Classical sources bear witness to the existence of slaves among the Scythians and the use of slave labour in the economy. In the Scythian world, however, slavery did not develop to any considerable extent, remaining mostly domestic and patriarchal, and 'slavery never became widespread among the nomads' as a basis of production.[14] Written sources also suggest that women held a comparatively high position

[10] Akishev and Kushaev, 1963, p. 35.
[11] Gryaznov, 1980.
[12] Grantovskiy, 1960, pp. 14–15.
[13] Vishnevskaya, 1973, pp. 67–8.
[14] Markov, 1976, p. 303.



FLG. 1. Arzhan: plan of a royal tomb.

among the nomadic Saka-Massagetae. For example, Herodotus describes Queen Tomyris as their leader in the war against Cyrus. It is not, however, clear whether a parallel can be drawn in this respect between Saka-Massagetian society and its western neighbour, the matrilineal Sarmatian society.

Culture of the Iranian nomads of Central Asia

Archaeological remains of the first millennium B.C. in the Eurasian steppes have been studied since the nineteenth century. Initially it was thought that this evidence supported the idea, based on an acquaintance with classical tradition, that the whole population of the steppe belt belonged to the same ethnic stock. They seemed to demonstrate cultural uniformity throughout the area. Everywhere burials were found in barrows (kurgans) containing

similar weapons, horse trappings and works of art. The choice of motifs and their style – known as the 'animal style' – pointed to a uniform cultural pattern. All this helped to give rise to the concept of a single Scythian culture, present throughout the Eurasian steppes, which had spread from a single centre and belonged to one tribe or people. This interpretation seemed to be in conformity with the statement of Herodotus (IV.11) that the Pontic Scythians came from Asia. On this evidence, the original homeland, common to all peoples who displayed this culture, should be sought somewhere in the Asian part of the steppelands.

Some modern scholars share this point of view and are paying special attention to dating the archaeological remains in various parts of the steppe zone. They hope to find the area where Scythian culture had its origins in those places where the forms of weapons, horse furniture and objects worked in the animal style appeared earliest. It has thus been suggested that one of the earliest complexes of this type is the famous Chilik barrow in eastern Kazakhstan.[15] In recent years the Arzhan barrow in Tuva has also attracted close attention. Its dating is a moot point but supporters of an earlier date (ninth–eighth centuries B.C.) believe that it is precisely this site that points to Central Asia as the zone in which the Scythian culture that spread across the Eurasian steppes first took shape.[16]

However, as new material accumulates and is carefully scrutinized there seems to be increasing evidence in support of a different concept, that is, that in the Scythian epoch there existed in the steppe zone not one but rather a whole series of distinctive cultures belonging to different peoples. Even the features that stamp these cultures as similar show appreciable local variations, while their other characteristics arc equally specific. The common features are due not only to their having come from a single source or to ethnic affinities but also to close contacts between the steppe tribes. These factors account for similar economic structures, bringing in their train an outward unification of life-style, and leading to the formation of a Scytho-Siberian cultural entity. Within this entity, every culture pattern is 'completely distinct and original by virtue of its own particular historical past and the particular conditions ruling in the country in which it is found'.[17] This of course in no way rules out the existence also of ethnic ties between some of these peoples.

A whole range of such Scythian-type cultures in the Eurasian steppes has already been studied. In addition to Scythian remains in the Black Sea area, these studies have covered Sarmatian complexes in the country round the lower reaches of the Don and Volga[18] and

[15] Chernikov, 1965.
[16] Terenozhkin, 1976, pp. 210–11.
[17] Gryaznov, 1978, p. 18.
[18] Smirnov, 1964.

various groups of Saka sites in Central Asia: on the lower Syr Darya, [19] in the Pamirs[20] and in Semirechye, [21] and a whole series of cultures whose assignment to any particular people mentioned in the sources is problematical, that is, the Tasmol culture in central Kazakhstan, [22] the Pazîrîk culture in the Altai, [23] the Tagar culture in southern Siberia.

Among the steppe peoples of the Scythian group the predominant economic activity was nomadic herding, but in some areas the economy was of a more complex nature.

Herodotus (IV. 17–18) describes the Pontic Scythian tribes partly as sedentary agriculturalists but he says (1.216) that the Massagetae of Central Asia 'sow no grain but live by keeping herds and fishing. . . . They also drink milk.' Investigation of the large fortified settlement of Chirik-Rabat, on the northwestern confines of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, a settlement connected with the Massagetae, certainly contradicts the statement that they led a purely nomadic life and shows that in their economy the ancient traditions of fishing were combined with tillage of the land and semi-nomadic stock-raising.

Close ties between the nomadic and agricultural societies of Central Asia can be traced not only in the political and ethnic but also in the cultural and productive spheres. As is usually the case with nomads in general, craft production among the nomads of Central Asia was not so well developed as in the settled agricultural provinces, from which they obtained the wares they needed. A social division of labour thus grew up between the nomads and the settled agriculturalists and craftsmen.

Classical writers were much impressed by the excellent quality of the arms of the Central Asian nomads. Quintus Curtius (IV.9.3) noted that they had coats of mail made 'of iron plates'. According to Arrian (III.13.4), the Central Asian warriors went into battle 'carefully covered' with a metal coat of mail. They also used metal helmets and shields of various shapes and sizes. According to Herodotus (1.215), the Massagetae's horses were protected by breast-plates. It has been suggested that it was in Central Asia that equine armour first appeared.[24] In the absence of any archaeological evidence for the advanced production of weapons by the nomads themselves, it may be supposed that some of their arms, especially defensive armour which required much workmanship, were imported from the provinces inhabited by a sedentary population.

On the other hand, evidence of ceramic production by the nomads themselves is provided by the so-called 'barbaric ceramics', distinguished by an extremely coarse texture.

[19] Tolstov and Itina, 1966; Vishnevskaya, 1973.
[20] Litvinsky, 1972.
[21] Akishev and Kushaev, 1963.
[22] Margulan, 1966, pp. 303 et seq.
[23] Rudenko, 1953.
[24] Gafurov, 1972, p. 92.

Typical of the tribes in the Uzboi region, in particular, were the large trough-shaped vessels, used as ossuaries; in the oases, they were unknown. Another point suggesting that they were locally produced is their usually large size (over 1 m in length), which would have made it difficult to transport them over long distances on account of their fragility.

Judging by Herodotus' account of the religion of the Massagetae, they practised the cult of the supreme sun god – Mithra – associated with various forms of fire- and horse-worship. Some scholars are of the opinion that as Zoroastrianism spread, some of the Sakas adopted its teachings.[25] The question of the Sakas' religion may be approached, it would seem, in the same way as that of their culture. There could not have been only one religion in such a vast region. The chances are that there were local interpretations of similar beliefs and rites, these being reflected in varying burial ceremonials in different provinces.

Some information about the religious view of the nomads of north-west Turkmenistan is provided by the Ichîanlî, [26] a monumental stone building dating from the fifth to second centuries B.C. This was, in all likelihood, a cult centre for the nomadic tribes of the plateau beyond the Uzboi.[27] The plan of the building is rectangular (35 × 40 m) with rounded corners to the south-east and south-west. The upper part of the building is topped by a thick and intricately constructed stone structure on which a hot fire had burned for a long time. The eastern and western part along the slope of the central elevation is traversed by parallel arched rows of vertically standing slabs, the gaps between which are filled with ashes of the 'sacred' fire that were brought here. South of the central high ground were outbuildings and passageways lined with large stone slabs standing on their edges. The surviving walls are as much as 2 m high. On the northern side, there is a semi-enclosed right-angled area with two altars. Other buildings contain large hearths or altars.[28] Traces of the prolonged action of fire are visible everywhere, and slag, the bones of animals (predominantly horse skulls and hooves), and a considerable number of bronze arrow-heads have been found. Two distinct types of pottery have been discovered in the complex: the local Daha-Massagetian earthenware and the roundware brought in from the south-western and southern regions. The large quantity of horses' bones inevitably brings to mind Herodotus' observation that the only god the Massagetae worshipped was the sun, to which they sacrificed horses (1.216). The horse, reflecting the ideology that was taking shape among the nomadic peoples, was

[25] Litvinsky, 1972.

[26] Almost in the centre of the burial ground containing barrows of different periods located on a hill to the south of the Dordul heights (a plateau beyond the Uzboi river) dominating the sands of the Kara Kum lowlands, the ruins of a stone building were discovered, which excavations showed to have no connection with the burial ground.

[27] Yusupov, 1976, p. 42.

[28] The fact that Ichîanlî had a number of peripheral 'altars' in addition to a central altar suggests that the former, unlike the latter, were directly associated with burial grounds.

FIG. 2. Decoration cut out from leather of a saddle covering: first kurgan at Pazîrîk (mountainous Altai). (After Rudenko, 1953.)

widely represented in the distinctive Scytho-Saka-Massagetian art known as the 'animal style'. Tacitus (VI.37) also noted the ideological significance of the horse image in speaking of the sacrificial slaughter of horses as a Parthian custom; so did Philostratus, who observed that the Parthian king Vardanes sacrificed a white horse of the best Nisa breed. The horse was equally popular in both Scythian and Saka art.[29]

The art of the Achaemenids also owes much to the nomadic art from which it borrowed so many features. At the same time, Achaemenid works in turn had a strong influence on the culture of the nomads. Evidence of the cultural and trade relations between Achaemenid Iran and Central Asia and the regions to the north-east of it is provided by various objects (everyday and ceremonial) discovered in the excavations of kurgans, such as the Arzhan burial mound (eighth-seventh centuries B.C.) and the Tuva and the Pazîrîk barrows (sixth-fourth centuries B.C.) in the Altai. Here, due to the permanent layer of ice, articles of leather (see Fig. 2), wool and thick felt have survived in an excellent state of preservation. Of considerable interest are pieces of woollen cloth and a short pile carpet with woven designs which suggest that they were of Iranian origin, though a Middle Asian provenance is not altogether excluded.[30] It seems reasonable to infer that their basic type of dwelling was the portable yurt. Burial sites at different localities show differences in form of construction, the objects they contain and the manner of burial. In the vicinity of the Sarîkamîsh delta of the Amu Darya, in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya and in Semirechye, alongside shallow-ditch graves were the huge barrows of the aristocracy, with complex wooden constructions or sophisticated structures in unbaked brick typical of the architecture of the seventh to third centuries B.C. In north-west Turkmenistan and in the eastern Pamirs, monumental stone vaults built at ground level were quite common and

[29] *Skifî i Sarmatî*1972 pp. 96–7.
[30] Gryaznov, 1975, p. 10; *Istoriya Turkmenskoy SSR*, 1957, pp. 69–71.

widespread, serving as family or tribal tombs. Such tombs have yielded a rich variety of articles – weapons, ornaments (including some in the animal style), and horse trappings very similar to those found in the Sarmatian monuments in the Ural region. Besides local earthenware, they contain bronze weapons and ornaments, imported beads (carnelian and lazurite) and pottery vessels brought in from the oases, providing further evidence of the links between the Saka-Massagetae and the Central and Western Asian worlds. The lion and panther motifs in the art of south Tagisken and Uygarak locate the Sakas of the Aral Sea region in the area to which the Scytho-Siberian animal style had spread.[31] Overall the nomadic tribes made a very significant contribution to the development of the Central Asian peoples. Military and political vitality, vigorous economic development, fostered by the commerce essential to the nomadic way of life, and strikingly original art were their characteristic features.

[31] Vishnevskaya, 1973; Vishnevskaya and Itina, 1971; Itina, 1981.