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Presenting the Warrior? Iron Age Scythian Materials and Gender Identity at the British Museum

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THE BP EXHIBITION: SCYTHIANS. WARRIORS OF ANCIENT SIBERIA, THE BRITISH MUSEUM, 14 SEPTEMBER 2017–14 JANUARY 2018, curated by St. John Simpson and Svetlana Pankova

THE BP EXHIBITION: SCYTHIANS. WARRIORS OF ANCIENT SIBERIA, edited by St. John Simpson and Svetlana Pankova. Pp. 368, color figs. 453. The British Museum and Thames & Hudson, London 2017. £30.00. ISBN 978-0-500-29364-5 (paper).

After numerous loans between the late 1970s and early 2000s of Scythian goods, and in particular the gold items recovered from elite burials, to such venerable institutions as the Metropolitan Museum, the Louvre, and the Los Angeles County Museum, the State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg, Russian Federation) recently loaned a collection of handpicked materials to the British Museum for an intriguing exhibition titled *Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia*. These materials offer compelling insights into a cultural, and perhaps sociopolitical, confederacy of pastoral groups conventionally referred to as the Scythians. More broadly, the Scythian exhibition at the British Museum contributes vibrantly to an expanding narrative about the complex nature of pastoral lifeways; a narrative often overlooked or ignored in discussions of societal growth and complexity.¹

The British Museum exhibition explores how the various Scythian groups that inhabited the Iron Age Eurasian steppe (fig. 1), ca. 900–200 B.C.E., shared similar perspectives on social status, identity politics, everyday life, human-animal/human-environment relationships, and colonial interactions that became prevalent from the seventh to third centuries B.C.E. The very design and production of the exhibition illuminate some of the

important topics currently being studied by archaeologists on the steppe: human-environment relations, the role of warfare and the warrior in society, as well as cultural contact. However, the exhibition also highlights through omission some of the more underexplored topics in the study of Scythian pastoral lifeways: gender identities and personhood, as well as Iron Age aesthetics. In this sense, what is omitted is as important as what is included, as decisions in the exhibition design, production, and execution reflect the seemingly dominant focus in the study of the Scythians: the life of male warriors and their role in Scythian society.

EXHIBITION DESIGN AND THE USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

In a somewhat dizzying display of color and colorful information, the exhibition itself is not only a traditional presentation of material culture from a relatively unknown specific region and time period but also an investigation into what it meant to be a male warrior on the Iron Age Eurasian steppe. The British Museum and their assistant keeper of Near Eastern antiquities and curator of the Scythian exhibition, St. John Simpson, designed it not only to convey this information but also to offer a learning environment that moves far beyond a conventional walking tour. In a move that should be emulated by other museums, the British Museum (at least for this exhibition) embraces the combined use of digital media, including online platforms, with the production of a massive tome—their exhibition catalogue. These technologies—video and blogs, along with the catalogue—create a rich array of resources for those audiences who know little of the history, archaeology, and culture of the Scythians and greatly complement, if not augment, the traditional exhibition space(s).

Despite the innovative mixture of media, it is never made quite clear how to approach the exhibition and its digital and analogue accompaniments. While obviously linked through thematic content, audiences might

¹All figures and captions were provided by The British Museum Press Office.



FIG. 1. Map of Eurasia, showing the extent of the Achaemenid empire (in red) and the Eurasian steppe and mixed woodland largely occupied by the Scythians (in green) (P. Goodhead).

wonder where to start first. I did not find the blogs or videos until after my visit. As an archaeologist working on Pontic Scythian societal developments the introductory information embedded in the blogs and videos was unnecessary. However, for a general visitor the online resources would make a significant difference in how much cohesive information could be gleaned from the exhibition alone. For instance, on the exhibition's homepage there are six primary blogs: "Who Were the Scythians"; "Scythians: An Introduction"; "Alternate Lifestyles of Antiquity: The Nomad"; "Scythians, Ice Mummies, and Burial Mounds"; "The Scythian: An Inspiration for Game of Thrones"; and "Bringing the Scythians to London." Other blogs include "Darius, Herodotus, and the Scythians" and "Ancient Tattoos." The blogs are not numbered, so visitors may have found where to start confusing. That said, the blogs had great potential to prepare visitors for the experience of the exhibition itself.

FIRST GALLERY: SCYTHIANS AND THE EURASIAN STEPPE

The exhibition space consists of five galleries and three gallery hallways. Admittedly, I was a bit confused

entering the first gallery, as the information displayed seemed incongruent with the initial steps into an exhibition centered on a relatively little-known culture. The lack of a guidebook, especially one with a map, seems a conspicuous oversight given that many visitors would be unfamiliar with the Scythians. The only introduction to the Scythians in this gallery is a panel noting that they had controlled the Eurasian steppe from approximately 900 to 200 B.C.E. This panel also states that we only know the Scythians through their burial mounds and their contents. These two points, control of the steppe and the methodology used to identify the Scythian archaeological presence, are interlinked and problematic. The assumption that the various Scythian tribes controlled the steppe is predicated on similarities in funerary rites and depositional practices of grave goods, which are used to interpret Scythian social organization rather than political control.

While I agree that mortuary practices are often our only source of data concerning Scythian social organization, the problem is that burial practices can skew our understanding of broader lifeways, as burials do not necessarily directly reflect human sociality but rather are

related, directly or indirectly, to the social (and political) aspects of human life. In addition, the predominant methodological focus on Scythian kurgans, or burial mounds, is because they are highly visible components of Eurasian Iron Age landscapes. Archaeologists in general have problems identifying pastoral habitation areas, or settlements/camps, given that (1) pastoralists are, to differing degrees, mobile; (2) their nonmortuary-related architecture (i.e., dwellings and other structures) often leave ephemeral traces; and (3) as a result, any traces of material culture on the surface are equally ephemeral. Within the last two decades, however, archaeologists working on the Eurasian steppe and elsewhere have developed field methods to identify such architectural and material culture traces, including the use of remote sensing, pedestrian survey, and surface collection. These methodological implications (and developments) suggest that the curators of the exhibition missed an important opportunity to inform audiences of a core component of archaeological inquiry, and one directly related to the study of the Scythians—that just because a specific material or architectural dimension of a society is more visible does not mean that other, less visible dimensions either are not there or are unimportant.

Instead, the only display case and accompanying informational panel in the rather sparsely accessorized first gallery present a belt buckle depicting a reclining male with his head resting on the lap of a female who wears a tall headdress and who is referred to as a possible deity (fig. 2). Another male, who holds the reins of two horses, sits behind the knees of the reclining male. All this occurs beneath the branches of a tree from which a quiver hangs, apparently in reference to wedding symbolism. The catalogue suggests that this tree is an allusion to the tree of life, and the female deity is thought to be related to earth and flora, or fertility.² Besides offering a glimpse into a possibly mythical scene, this buckle provides insight into the complex nature of male identity, even as it leaves female identity construction underexplored.

The second panel in this gallery portrays the environmental zones of the Eurasian steppe. The steppe is a vast stretch of grasslands that runs from Mongolia to the western Ukrainian/eastern Bulgaria border. While



FIG. 2. A gold belt plaque of a Scythian funerary scene, fourth-third century B.C.E. Siberian Collection of Peter the Great (V. Terebenin; © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 2017).

at times broken up by mountain ranges and forested areas, the steppe runs nearly continuous, allowing it to serve as a cultural and socioeconomic, as well as physical, bridge between eastern and western Eurasia, at least since the Early Bronze Age, ca. 3300 B.C.E. As a result, the steppe has become inextricably associated with the pastoral societies that emerged around the Early Bronze Age and continued to the Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries C.E.

This panel refers to the Eurasian steppe as “territory” controlled by the Scythians. The term is a convenient but perhaps mistaken label for the geographic areas that the Scythian tribes inhabited for some 700 years. Just as “Scythians” is not a moniker for socially and culturally homogenous peoples,³ the lands they inhabited very well may not have been treated as territory in the sense often used in socioeconomic and political discussions of agrarian-based states and empires; that is, as marked property. Pastoral territories may indeed be more fluid and not necessarily bound by the same markers as those of agriculturalists. Herodotus spoke of the Scythians during their engagement with Darius’ forces in the late sixth century B.C.E. as being mobile and their battle tactics

²Korolkova 2017, 57.

³Yablonsky 2000; although see Unterländer et al. (2017) for genetic evidence suggesting similar origins.

very fluid, which led Darius to think that the Scythians were fleeing because of their refusal to pitch a standing battle.⁴ The Scythian king Idanthrysus responded that the Scythians never run from a fight but rather they fight as they live in peace—on the move. This may be the best way to conceptualize Scythian territory: fluid, malleable, and wherever they live at a specific time and place.

SECOND GALLERY: SCYTHOLOGY AND ANIMAL ART STYLE

The second gallery, “The Siberian Collection of Peter the Great,” is dedicated to what archaeologists working in Russia, Ukraine, and surrounding countries term “Scythology,” or the study of the Scythians, along with a secondary focus on the Scythian animal art style. The gallery introduces visitors to the archaeological and historical concerns of 19th-century Russia under the direction and sponsorship of Czar Peter the Great (1672–1725), whose portrait is by far the most striking piece in the gallery (fig. 3). Peter, who ruled the Russian empire as czar and emperor from 1682 to 1725, commissioned scientific teams to travel the breadth of Siberia to seek out natural resources. These teams noted the substantial number of mounds across the steppe that stretched the extent of the territory of the Russian empire, which drew the attention of specialists and grave robbers alike. The recovery of items from these mounds led Peter to issue an edict that such objects should be sent to St. Petersburg, and that drawings should be made of everything found.⁵ The walls of the gallery are adorned with illustrations of the palaces of Czar Peter, as well as the *kunstkamera* (the Cabinet of Curiosities), where the recovered items found a home. A case standing in the center of the room running more than half its length displays some of the best-known examples of Eurasian Iron Age material culture, including the famous gold plaque of a coiled panther, an emblematic icon of the Scythian animal art style (fig. 4).

The Scythian animal art style is renowned for its portrayal of known animals such as lions, panthers, horses, birds, stags, and livestock, along with mythic animals such as what we would now call animal hybrids—half-bird, half-feline or half-bird, half-horse creatures, to



FIG. 3. Portrait of Peter the Great (Royal Collection Trust; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2017).

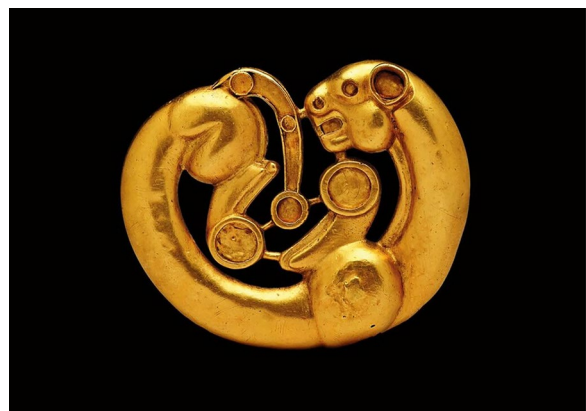


FIG. 4. Gold plaque in the shape of a coiled panther, fourth–third century B.C.E. Siberian Collection of Peter the Great (V. Terebenin; © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 2017).

⁴ de Selincourt 1952, 280–82; Honeychurch 2015, 6.

⁵ Simpson and Pankova 2017, 11.

name a few. This case presents varied types of animal art style, many of which would have been worn on belt buckles or plaques, and all made of gold. In addition to the items themselves, their watercolor prints are also displayed.

THIRD GALLERY: SCYTHIAN MATERIAL CULTURE AND STATUS

The third gallery explores the material culture of the Scythians and, perhaps most important, provides insight into who they were beyond the gold items found in their burial mounds, although there is still plenty of gold to leave visitors awestruck. The gallery presents a stunning introduction to the Scythians, nomadic pastoralists who at times became belligerent and were usually feared by the various states that ran adjacent to the steppe along its southern border. The term “Scythians” is “a collective name for many migratory tribes who enjoyed similar lifestyles, culture, economy, and sets of beliefs,” or at least as defined by those who came into contact with them.⁶ The terms used to describe the Scythians are all foreign (*Skythoi*, *Sacae*, *Saka*), as they were used by those very societies that had contact with these nomadic pastoralists, while the Scythian tribes did not read or write (that we know of). Thus, the Scythian tribes apparently did not differentiate themselves in any formally documented way. That said, the items (and background information) displayed in the gallery indicate that Scythian burial rites were used to express important social differences in terms of rank and tomb type.⁷ The grave goods commonly associated with Scythian burials, including gold and silver ornamentation and feasting equipment, are complemented by a fascinating collection of quotidian goods made from allegedly less precious materials.

Through the addition of these more mundane, everyday items—clothes, wooden utensils, iron and bronze ornamentation—and examples of ritual places other than burial mounds, this gallery compellingly illustrates the complex dimensions of Scythian lifeways. The wall immediately to the left as one walks into the gallery demonstrates some of this complexity through a focus on the rock art of the Scythians, mostly the famous deer stones

of the eastern Siberian/Mongolian steppe and the Altai Mountains along with a few petroglyphs from the same area. The deer stones indicate not only how the Scythians viewed themselves in terms of abstract identity but also how these groups navigated the landscape, perhaps treating these stones as “landscape anchors,” or markers that offer points of intersection between travel and memory.⁸ The stones are anthropomorphic carvings of individuals with belts, tools, and weapons. The heads of the stones are not anthropomorphic but rather display sun and/or lunar symbols and at times ornamentation such as earrings. The petroglyphs, by contrast, depict elk, Bactrian camels, and even a five-horse chariot.

Moving from the abstract and depersonalized notion of the individual, visitors next encounter how the Scythians personalized their appearance. Many visitors will be drawn to the gold items recovered from numerous burial mounds, but this part of the exhibition represents a less well-known aspect of Scythian lifeways: tattooing and dress. Perhaps the most fascinating part of the whole exhibition is the tattooed skin from individuals recovered from the Pazyryk burials from the Tuva region of the Siberian steppe (fig. 5). The Pazyryk individuals were buried in wood coffins under mounds of stones in the steppe permafrost on the Ukok Plateau of the Altai Mountains.⁹ The permafrost preserved the bodies through time, including organic material such as hair, skin, leather, rugs, clothing, and wooden implements and furniture (e.g., stools). While human skin may seem a macabre item to put in an exhibition, or at the very least evoke images of the famous Amazonian rainforest shrunken heads, the tattoos of the male (chief) and female (wife of the chief, or as labeled in the exhibition, “chief’s consort”) of Pazyryk allow yet another glimpse into how the Scythians perceived and experienced their world. These images depict how human life was intertwined with the animal world, be it real or mythic.

Items such as the iconic coiled panther (see fig. 4) exhibited in the second gallery and the tattooed skin in the third gallery indicate that the meaning behind the animal art style of the Scythian groups, or at least those at Pazyryk, may have permeated everyday life as

⁶Alexyev 2017, 20.

⁷Khazanov 1975; Tsjetskhladze 1998; Hanks 2002.

⁸Hammer 2014.

⁹Rudenko 1970.



FIG. 5. Part of human skin with a tattoo (from the left side of the breast and back of a man), Pazyryk 2, late fourth–early third century B.C.E. (V. Terebenin; © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 2017).

well as their burial rituals and funerary dress. This focus on everyday life is amplified by the presence of a *torc*, or elite neck ring, made from mundane materials, including wood, horn, and bronze components, and male headgear made from wood and leather depicting a bird of prey attacking or possibly eating (or regurgitating) a stag. These items not only fit into the animal art style shown in gallery two but also demonstrate a mastery of wood and horn carving that matched the Scythian ability to work metal. The rest of the third gallery, or at least along the outer walls, presents what the Scythians actually looked like and wanted to look like, and how they saw themselves. A false beard made of human hair along with tools and textiles indicate what types of things these groups wore and used. This includes a leather boot and shoe along with fragments of dyed woolen textiles

with woven designs on the edges. In addition, there is a pair of decorated leggings, part of a trouser leg, and a shirt sleeve. The leggings are made of undyed white felt, which would have provided a stark contrast to the garishly colored decoration and more muted natural hues of upper garments. Additional items include sable fur, leather pouches, and wooden combs.

Along the wall opposite the rock art, there is a display case of bronze mirrors. While often attributed to females, mirrors are also found in male Scythian burials. The mirrors are some of the more striking items in the third gallery, as they literally demonstrate how the Scythians saw themselves. Many are made of a copper alloy or bronze that would have been polished to a high shine to create a reflective surface. Except for one with only a tang left for a handle, the rest depict animal scenes on either the handle or the back of the mirror. Some of the earliest mirrors from the steppe were found at Arzhan 2, a large Scythian burial mound in the Altai Mountains, as well as at Pazyryk, albeit in a later period. More were found in association with the Scythian groups that Herodotus called the “Royal Scythians” in the Pontic Black Sea region.

A display case filled with various kinds of adornments and other curiosities stands in the center of the gallery and offers further insight into Scythian self-fashioning. These materials consist of gold appliqué and miniature plaques that might have been attached to clothing, as well as earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and belt buckles made from varied materials, including silver, bronze, stone, carnelian, amber, horn, and glass. Some of these adornments are done in the animal art style, including running or leaping stags, felines in curled or other positions, and reclining horses. Additional plaques, usually gold, depict scenes of predatory animals such as lions attacking deer.

FOURTH GALLERY: PASTORAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND IRON AGE COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

The themes of the fourth gallery revolve around 19th- and 20th-century ethnographic research into steppe pastoralists, as well as Iron Age feasting and colonial interactions derived from the importation of drinking equipment and wine. Banners centered on these themes hang between the gallery’s display cases. The first banner states that the Scythians engaged in a portable lifestyle focused on ease of movement, which also meant

that their goods had to be equally portable. This banner hangs next to a display case providing information on what I can only call the ethnography of nomads, going back to the early 20th century, including old photographs of nomadic encampments detailing how nomads lived and their limited forms of material culture centered on the felt-covered, wooden-framed dwellings, or what we know as *yurts* or *gers*—terms for nomadic dwellings that differ by region.

The next display case contains items that were likely to have been used inside Scythian dwellings, with a focus on everyday life. Excavations of the Scythian burial mounds, especially those of the eastern steppe in southern Siberia and the Altai regions, yield intriguing glimpses into these aspects of Scythian lifeways. These cases include a likely reconstruction of a hemp burning kit alongside a small wooden hexapod (a stand with six legs) and its felt cover, as well as an arsenical copper brazier where hemp, or hemp seeds, would have burned. The recovery of such a set at the Pazyryk burials indicates that to some extent the experience of getting high, or at least entering transformative states of mind, on a periodic, or even daily, basis seems to have had ritual importance for Scythian individuals and/or communities.

While the transformative state brought on by the ingestion of hemp smoke is an interesting dimension of Scythian life, it is their supposed addiction to Greek wine that played a key role in their rituals and ultimately their socioeconomic structure and ranking. The role of wine in Scythian society is revealed through two material sources: the excavation of substantial numbers of wine (or oil) amphoras and the recovery of Greek-produced specialized drinking sets, including *kylixes*, *rhytons*, and varied kinds of serving equipment. The trade between Herodotus' Royal Scythians and the Black Sea Greek/Attic colonies ca. 550–450 B.C.E. came to play a vital role in Scythian social structure, as seen in the ostentatious burials evidenced in the central Dnieper and Crimean region of present-day Ukraine.

Whereas most of the materials come from the State Hermitage Museum, at this point in this gallery's theme—colonial encounters and imported items—the exhibition increasingly relies on materials from other museums, including the National Museum of Kazakhstan and the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford. Given the current political situation between

the Russian Federation and Ukraine, it is not realistic to expect that the National Museum of History in Kiev would augment this array of foreign-made luxury items with their own impressive collections of burial items recovered from central and southern Ukraine.

FIFTH GALLERY AND GALLERY HALLWAYS: WARRIORS AND HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

The theme of the fifth gallery is the relationship between Scythian warriors and their horses, with horse-riding equipment taking center stage. While the Scythians were master craftsmen when it came to metal-, wood-, and horn-working, as well as textile production, the production of elaborate riding equipment, such as saddles, bridles, and cheek pieces, indicates a depth to their material complexity often overlooked in considerations of pastoral societal development. Only recently has pastoral materiality come into the spotlight, which raises the question, why has this dimension of pastoral lifeways been ignored for so long?¹⁰ In part, this is because archaeologists are still too focused either on human-animal/human-environment relationships in pastoral societies or on the pastoral warrior and his tools—the sword, the bow, and knives/daggers. Without a doubt, the Scythian bow was a remarkable technological achievement. Rather than using only wood, Scythians made bows that were wood and sinew hybrids, shorter in length than traditional bows and more powerful than any bow type previously used. Its length and strength made it ideal for Scythian archers, as it allowed them to fire rapidly while mounted. However, the nonweapon materials are equally fascinating and do much to flesh out a more complete picture of the Scythians and the importance of their relationship with the animals in their daily lives as well as their various ceremonies.

Three gallery hallways close the exhibition. The first two display oak coffins from the Pazyryk burial and present videos documenting the excavations of mounds in the Altai and Tuva regions and how archaeologists penetrated the permafrost layer. The final gallery hallway, which leads out of the exhibition, engages with the historical and material cultures of what came after the

¹⁰Doumani Dupuy 2014; Grillo 2014; Johnson 2016.

Scythians, especially the Sauro/Sarmatian cultures that emerged soon after the collapse of Scythian society.

CONCLUSION

There is still considerable debate as to how homogeneous Scythian culture was and how the Scythians organized themselves along sociopolitical lines. The British Museum exhibition goes a long way in establishing the connections between how warriors and elites from different areas of the Eurasian steppe identified themselves in similar ways and how the Scythians organized themselves socioeconomically. Clearly, the “warrior” occupies a central role in much of the scholarly research and imagination when it comes to Scythian society and history, or central Asia more broadly.¹¹ Indeed, as noted in the first panel of the first gallery, much of the information that we have regarding Scythian society comes from burials, and many of these burials contained male warriors.

However, for decades now, Ukrainian archaeologists (and others) have suggested that we move beyond the theme of the male warrior and explore how gender identities were constructed and expressed in Iron Age Scythian burials.¹² Generally, this suggestion has gone relatively unheeded. The complex nature of gender construction and its expression, including a related aesthetic dimension to these materials, in Scythian burial rites is only beginning to be fully realized in the archaeological scholarship of the Iron Age steppe.

The British Museum exhibition illustrates the importance of more research into the gendered aspects of Scythian life. Despite minor quibbling with the somewhat disjointed design of the exhibition, and a more serious problem with the near sole focus on the male warrior as a comprehensive, reflective lens on Scythian society, it is safe to say that the exhibition was not to be missed. These items are only available outside the Russian Federation every 10 years or so, which makes *Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia* a near once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to better understand one of the most enigmatic but strongly influential cultures in world history.

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¹¹ Baumer 2012.

¹² Mozolevskii 1979; Fialko 1991; Guliaev 2003; Taylor 2010; Hutson et al. 2012.

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