

Chapter 7

Scythian Culture: Agriculture Architecture Armaments & Religion

Scythians were indeed renowned throughout the ancient world for being expert horsemen who were both fierce and extremely dangerous in combat. But what is surprising to some was the fact that they “played as active a part in commerce as in war and constituted so important an element in the life of their age that Herodotus [called by many ‘the father of History’] found it necessary to devote to them an entire book of his great history.”¹

Much of the specific archaeological knowledge about the Scythians and their lifestyle is due to the fact that their underground tombs in the Altai region filled quickly with rain water, and the winter climate transformed them into solid blocks of ice. Large rocks covering the tombs kept the ground insulated, creating a deep freeze that preserved organic materials for millennia from decay or pilfering by tomb robbers.

The picture of everyday life among the Scythians is far more complex than many would suspect. The Scythians did have well-organized communities that were led and disciplined by tribal kings and clan chieftains, who held their offices by either hereditary or elective right depending on the tribe and clan. Scythian society was highly stratified and income was unequally distributed. In tribes or tribal confederations with a king or a council having differently ranked aristocratic governors, social classes mentioned included: scepter-bearers, the noble, nomarchs or great land owners, the distinguished, spear-carriers, soothsayers, freemen, and slaves.²

Despite differences as to the manner in selecting leadership and the greater or lesser influence of Greek, Persian or Chinese on various tribes due to their geographic location on the Eurasian steppes, both European and Asian Saka showed a remarkable similarity of tastes, interests, clothing, and equipment. ³ During the Scythian period, the Saka tribes living throughout the Eurasian steppe were “linked by close and regular contacts.”⁴

Since all the mounted nomads of the Scythian age spoke the same Iranian tongue [an Indo-European based language that was a fusion of Semitic Aramaic and Old Persian as per the Parthians], whether they came from the Dniestr [Ukraine region] or the banks of the Oxus [western border region of ancient India] , there seems reason to think that at any rate **the majority were linked by some sort of racial tie**. A definite affinity is indeed suggested by the nature of their art, which show well-nigh identical features over so wide an area.⁵

¹ Rice, p. 23.

² Rolle, p. 123.

³ Rice. pp. 21-22.

⁴ Rice, p. 28.

⁵ Rice, p. 42.



While many Scyths were indeed nomads who followed their herds and flocks across the steppes in great seasonal circles, there were also many other Saka who farmed the land, and worked at a variety of crafts and industries. The Scythian “Pittsburgh” of antiquity is called in Russian the *Kamenskoe gorodisce*. It is a large fortified settlement enclosing an area of 4.6 sq. miles at the junction of the Dnieper, Konka and Bol’saya Belozerka rivers. This was a densely populated fortress with smelting furnaces, foundries, and smithies that processed the high-grade iron ore mined regionally and brought in by boat.

The Saka produced iron ingots for trade as well as every sort of finished metal product such as weapons, armour, horse equipment, pots and pans. Copper, lead and zinc were also smelted there. Some work shops specialized in working with copper, gold and silver. The importance of this major metal working settlement is emphasized by the presence of an “acropolis.” This architectural concept comes directly from Near Eastern town planning! This fortified palace permitted close royal supervision of the centre’s activities. Ordinary metal workers lived in a housing subdivision surrounding the fortress with individual lots ranging in size from about one to two and one-half acres. The Kamenskoe gorodisce is just one of over 100 fortified “city-like” settlements that have been identified in ancient Scythia.⁶ All these were protected by impressive earthen ramparts, some of which approached 59 ft. in width, topped by wooden walls at least 23 ft. high, surrounded by deep moats filled with sharpened stakes.⁷

In several of these fortified settlements one is struck by the hugeness of the interior, the fortification of an area of higher ground after the manner of an “acropolis,” the dense population and the abundance of imported goods. Soviet archaeologists see in them great tribal centers **similar to the Celtic oppida in the west**. By far the most impressive fortified settlement in the forest steppe is the *gorodisce* of Bel’sk.... The ramparts are 20.5 miles (33

⁶ “Sites such as the Bel’sk and Kamenskoe *gorodisce*, to which further examples could be added, show clearly that town planning in Scythia was not merely a reflection of Mediterranean ideas, as was for a long time assumed. The extraordinarily spacious complexes with their ‘acropolis’ area seem to be orientated more towards Near Eastern models. The architecture too was not derived from Mediterranean forms: on the contrary, the robust building style which was adapted to climatic conditions influenced the Greeks,” Rolle, p. 122.

⁷ Rolle, p. 117.

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kilometres) in length...linking three separate forts into one huge whole which has an area of approximately 4000 hectares (9880 acres).⁸

Part of the reason for such defensive measures was that the Scythians were heavily involved in the slave trade. Regular raids on neighbouring tribes provided a constant supply of labor for their own use or for sale to the Greek colonies on the shores of the Black Sea. Scythian names regularly show up in ancient Greek slave lists as potters, domestic servants, but especially as archers.⁹



Emmer Wheat

But it was the agricultural exports that provided the Scythians with their greatest source of wealth. The city of Athens alone is recorded as buying 600,000 bushels of high quality grain from the Scythians yearly!¹⁰ The Scythians grew several types of wheat, especially emmer wheat, as well as barley, millet, rye, oats and probably buckwheat.¹¹

Archaeological excavations show they grew peas, beans, lentils, onions, garlic, flax, rape, and hemp. Fruits such as apples and cherries were grown and preserved by drying. Herbs like coriander were also grown and used for “teas.” Hazelnuts, acorns, honey and “Scythian roots” were harvested.¹²

Cheese, meat, leather and wool from the vast herds and flocks were export commodities. The Scythians were renowned as great merchants of agricultural products. They truly lived in a land of milk and honey with resources to spare!

The Saka traded with the Greeks for things they couldn’t produce themselves, but that they dearly appreciated and for which they would pay a premium. High on this list were wine, olive

⁸ Rolle, pp. 117-119.

⁹ Peitrovsky, Galanina, Grach, p. 13.

¹⁰ Zenaide Ragozin, *Media*, 4th ed., Fisher Unwin, 1890, p. 414.

¹¹ Israelites and Scythians were major producers of wheat and barley. See 2 Chronicles 2:10 and Isaiah 28:25.

<https://www.academia.edu/780291/>

[Archaeobotanical_investigation_of_two_Scythian_Sarmatian_period_pits_in_eastern_Ukraine_Implications_for_floodplain_cereal_cultivation](#)

¹² Rolle, p. 110.

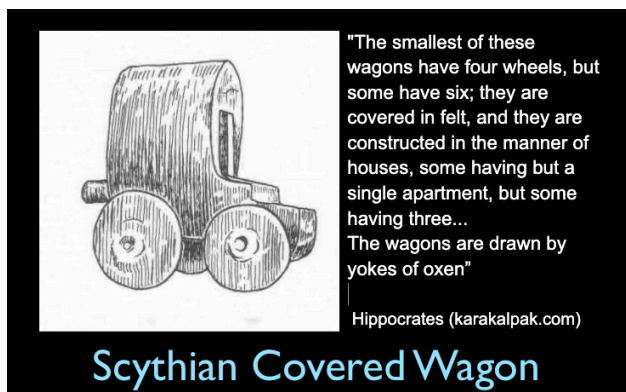
oil,¹³ fancy adornments, and some special weapons. Scythian agriculture was practiced in what is called the forest steppes. This was a belt of land just north of the grass steppes in the western end of the Eurasian plains. The forest steppes bordering the grass steppes were settled by the Scyths who dominated several non-Scythic tribes who also lived in the region.

This delightful forest steppe land had many rivers and streams full of fish. As there were good salt deposits in the area, the Scythians produced a lot of salt fish. They also preserved their meat for easy transportation in a fashion that struck the historian Tamara Talbot Rice as being similar to the Scottish *haggis*.¹⁴ The deciduous forests abounded in wild game and the Scythians loved to hunt. Generally speaking, the Scythians were a well fed lot.

The arrival of the Scythians on the steppes is also reflected in the changed composition of the domestic animals being kept. The Saka seemed to have brought with them a breed of cattle that was either hornless or very short horned. But while the new inhabitants of the steppes continued to keep cattle like their predecessors, the Scythians preferred to run more sheep than cattle on their grasslands.¹⁵ Another interesting Scythic animal husbandry characteristic, according to Herodotus, was that they did not keep pigs:

They make no offerings of pigs, nor will they keep them at all in their country.¹⁶

Archaeologists have only found pig bones during the Scythian era in the forest steppe area, inhabited by a mixed population of Scythians and other tribes. Abhorrence of swine's flesh was a custom that was peculiar to the ancient Hebrews, and, it would seem, the Scythians.



Wagon Trains and Horses

When the nomadic Scythians traveled, the men rode their horses while the wives (the Saka were patriarchal and polygamous in social organization) and small children followed in covered wagons pulled by oxen. Many wagons and toy models of wagons have been discovered in Scythian tombs. The fact that a distinctive model of the Scythian wagon appeared simultaneously over a wide geographical region has puzzled archaeologists:

Little clay models of these prototypes of the modern

¹³ The ancient Israelites had been big exporters of olive oil and wine. See 2 Chronicles 2:10. These, however, would not grow well in the Eurasian steppes. But emigrant peoples have traditionally imported certain key cultural foodstuffs they missed from their old homelands. So if the Scythians were indeed emigrated Israelites, this would fit the profile of that people's culinary taste for imported Mediterranean wines and olive oil in their new homeland.

¹⁴ Rice, p. 63.

¹⁵ Rolle, p. 101. The ancient Israelites also seemed to run more sheep than cattle on their grasslands. At the dedication of Solomon's temple 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep were sacrificed. See 2 Chronicles 7:5.

¹⁶ Herodotus, *The History*, 4.63.

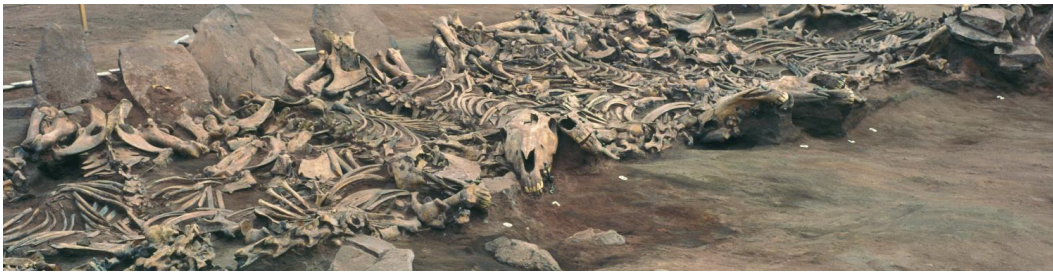
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caravan have been found in some of the Scythian burials, ... near the Ulski barrow in the Kuban. Strangely similar terra-cotta models of the same type have been found in the Pontus and in Cappadocia. [The Russian archaeologist] Rostovtzeff ascribes the resemblance to **a community of race** rather than to the influence of trade. **The likeness is very surprising**, for it is no less difficult to see how the Scythian examples could have been influenced by peoples living on the far shore of the Euxine [Black Sea] than it is to account for **the spontaneous development of the form along well-nigh identical lines. Yet so little is known about these remote days that some unrecorded migration may well have been responsible for the resemblance.**¹⁷

A clan on the move was like a town on wheels, following the herds and flocks in impressive wagon trains. A rich Scythian might own as many as 80 wagons to move his extended family and his “stuff”! A man was considered poor and derisively called an “eight-footer,” if he only had one wagon. Some of the discovered wagons had coachwork 8.7 ft high and could be completely disassembled for transport on horseback through narrow mountain passes. Other wagons carried “lift-off campers,” yurts or tents that could be quickly lifted off the wagon bed and pegged down for the night. The inside of these tents was furnished with both felt and wool pile rugs for flooring, while the walls were hung with marvellously coloured tapestries with appliqué designs.

The Scythians’ mobile equipment was highly practical and ingenious.¹⁸ Their taste in furnishings was not at all primitive. They bought (or pillaged) from the Achaemenid Persians the luxurious portable dinner services, upholstered beds and collapsible seating that were originally designed for the field mess tents of Persian army officers on maneuvers.¹⁹ But they also creatively innovated whatever they needed:

We can only admire the practical and manageable design of this little steppe oven; in the cold season it provided warmth and at the same time could be used for frying, roasting or boiling and for heating up smaller portions. On its grill plate lay iron rods with movable handles, no doubt forerunners of our gridirons; a utensil similar to a waffle iron was probably used for deep-fried pastries [ancient waffle cones and donuts?].²⁰



Scythian Horse Burial

The Scythian Kurgan Arzhan 2 Credit: Michael Hochmuth, German Archaeological Institute, Berlin

¹⁷ Rostovtzeff, M., *Iranians and Greeks in south Russia*, Oxford, 1922, pp. 11, 224, cited by Rice, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ Rolle, pp. 114-115.

¹⁹ William Cullican, *The Medes and the Persians*, Praeger, New York, 1965, p. 136.

²⁰ Rolle, p. 114.

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To be Scythian meant that one loved horses. When a Saka chieftain died he was entombed with a good string of his fully decked out favourite mounts, which is the reason we know so much about Scythian horses and their gear.

All the horses' trappings which have so far been found, regardless of whether they come from the east or the west of the plain, reveal the great importance which the Scythians attached to the turn-out of their mounts.

Can the inhabitants of England have inherited this outlook together with the decorative elements which affected "Celtic" art?²¹

The Scythians kept at least three types of working and riding horse breeds. They kept track of their chestnut and bay coloured horses by tattooing the insides of their ears. Their riding horses both resembled in appearance and corresponded in size to modern pure-bred Arabians.²²

Scythian "cowboys" were experts in training and breeding horses and in the use of lassos and whips. They trained their horses to kneel or bend down on one or both legs on command so that a heavily armoured warrior who had been knocked off his horse in battle could easily and quickly remount.

Pliny said the Saka loved to ride stallions, but they usually gelded everyday transportation. In battle the Saka preferred mares because they could urinate on the run without stopping. This preference reminded the Greek author Strabo of the Arab's famous "fighting mares."²³ Riding without stirrups and using only light saddles or "saddle-cloths," a rider would grip the horse low on its belly so that horse and rider would move as one. This made it easier for the Scythians to accurately hit their targets when they loosened a stream of arrows at full gallop, thus inspiring awe and fear in their enemies.

The Scythians turned out their horses with an incredibly opulent panache that for all its vivid colour and richness was excellent in its workmanship and always practical. The type of horse bit used resembles the modern snaffle.

At Pazirik [the Siberian tombs] the bridles consisted of nose, cheek and forehead straps as well as of an ear-band, the whole being secured by a buckle placed on the left side of the animal's head. This halter-like bridle had been used in Assyria from as far back as the first half of the first millennium, and was probably much the same as that invented by the world's earliest riders.²⁴



But some of the most remarkable of the horse equipment were the horse head-dresses. What they were like can be most readily grasped by the modern reader if they think back about how the knights turned out their horses at jousting tournaments in feudal Europe. The Scythian horse head-dresses seem to be representing some sort of

²⁴ Rice, p. 129-130. **Scythian Horse Tack**
reconstruction by Krym Altynbekov. (Sackler gallery)

heraldic symbols decorated in 2-D and 3-D Representations of panthers attacking stags, horned and winged dragons, griffins, horns, majestic plumes, birds with outstretched wings were coloured in gold, silver, greens, and blues. The archaeologists were puzzled at what could have been the source for such amazing equine accoutrement:

...drawing attention to the plumes with which the horses in the sculptures from Nineveh are decked, Rudenko is nevertheless not inclined to ascribe the Pazirik head-dresses to Assyrian influence. Rather does he believe that in both instances the idea of adorning the heads of horses in some way was derived from a common source, **probably of west Asiatic origin and dating to the first quarter of the first millennium [B.C.]**.²⁵

The House of Isaac had a thing about horses. The prophet Isaiah noted that “their land is filled with horses” (2:7, NRSV). It seems that one of ancient Israel’s big problems was that they put too much trust in their horses. Again, in a prophetic witness to future generations Isaiah warned:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved [returning to the Torah teaching of the LORD’s ways and Sabbath keeping]; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength [faith]. But you refused and said, “No! We will flee upon horses”—therefore you shall flee! and, “We will ride upon swift steeds” —therefore your pursuers shall be swift! (30:15-16, NRSV).

During the first quarter of the first millennium B.C., the Israelites were heavily invested in the horse trade with their neighbours throughout Western Asia:

Solomon’s horses were imported from Egypt and Kue [Cilicia, on the southeast coast of Asia Minor]; the king’s traders received them from Kue at the prevailing price. They imported from Egypt, and then exported, a chariot for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred fifty; so through them these were exported to all the kings of the Hittites [modern Turkey] and the kings of Aram [Syria].... Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horses which he stationed in the chariot cities... Horses were imported for Solomon from Egypt and from all lands (2 Chronicles 1:16-17; 9:25, 28, NRSV).



The Elegant but Practical Scythian Wardrobe

To occupy themselves during the winters the Scythian men, spent considerable time making, repairing and decorating their weapons and equipment. The women were occupied with the normal household duties including clothing manufacture. The clothing of the Scythian men was different from the flowing togas of the Greeks and Romans. Perfectly suited to their equestrian lifestyle, Scythian men wore close fitting, ornately decorated pants, which they tucked into high boots made of soft, expertly tanned leather. Their tailored, belted tunics flared at the hips and were shaped at the waist. These were made in wool and with different textures of leather, ranging from

heavy to very light and supple, often lined with furs like sable, or perhaps wool felt. The tunics,

²⁵ Rudenko, S.I., *Kulturnoe naselenie gornovo Altaya v Skifskoe vremia*, USSR Academy of Science, Moscow, 1953, cited by Rice, p. 119.

which are believed to have been adaptations of the *Assyrian cavalry tunic*,²⁶ were finished off with neat stitching and trimmed with enthusiastic use of colourful, elaborate appliqués. The men often wore peaked caps tied at the chin, which might be soft or rigid depending on the tribe.



Scythian Princess

Saka women were rarely portrayed on Scythic metalwork. Consequently less is known of their wardrobe. Still, archaeologists have discovered in the Pazirik tombs that their clothes were even more ornate than the men's. Apparently they wore long robes with tight fitting bodices, straight sleeves ornamented with gold and exquisite appliqués, trimmed with fur. They also had high hats with a veils "somewhat similar in shape to those worn by Welsh women of the 18th century."²⁷ The overall impression of Scythian clothing is one of comfortable elegance, designed with long-wearing practicality and the elements in mind.

Renowned as Party Animals

Whether rancher, farmer, miner, metalworker, teamster, merchant, warrior or chieftain, all Scythians were well known in the ancient world as supreme party animals! The Greeks viewed them as lecherous drunkards who didn't know how to drink in moderation.

Come, my boy, give me the goblet, in one draught it shall be emptied! In the jug mix ten parts water, five parts wine thou shalt add to it. I would be intoxicated, not gripped in maenadic [mad, orgiastic] frenzy. Let us not again this evening with our shouts and noisy uproar get ourselves as drunk as Scythians, let's get moderately tipsy and our best songs sing with fervor.²⁸

It seems the Scythians liked to drink their booze straight without cutting it with water. This was called "to drink like a Scythian." Some early Greek writers accused the Scythians of being overweight lazy slobs who during their drinking parties loved to spin yarns, play jokes, and go through "blood brother" rituals in which they pledged eternal fraternity. As a matter of honor, such pledges were taken very seriously even after sobering up.

²⁶ Rice, p. 69.

²⁷ Rice, pp. 68-69.

²⁸ *Anacreon*, 3:43, first half of the 6th century B.C., cited by Rolle, p. 93.

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The Scythians loved to sing and dance at their parties “to the accompaniment of drums and string instruments resembling lutes” as well as flutes or pipes.²⁹ Academic research has revealed that the Scythian lutes or lyres bear remarkable similarities to later Central European stringed instruments dating from the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. as found in “the singer’s tomb” in Cologne as well as from Oberflacht in Wurtemberg. Lute or lyre picks were carved from goats’ hooves.³⁰

If this sounds a little bit like the scene at the pubs, pop-rock discos, dances and raves of the second half of the 20th century in certain Western countries, then consider this extra bit of information. Archaeologists have discovered in Scythian tombs the equipment necessary for making Scythian “incense” as described by Herodotus in the mid-5th century B.C.

They act as follows: they make a booth by fixing in the ground three [sometimes six] sticks [about 4 ft. high] and over them woollen felts [or tanned hides], which they arrange to fit as close as possible; inside the booth a dish is placed upon the ground, into which they put a number of red hot stones... and creeping under the felt coverings, throw some *hemp seed* upon the red hot stones; immediately it smokes, and gives out such vapours as no Grecian vapor bath can exceed; the Scyths delighted, shout for joy.³¹

This passage shows that while Herodotus could describe a custom in good detail, archaeologically confirmed right down to the burned hemp seed remains in bronze pots with stones, the ancient Greek historian sometimes completely missed the proper interpretation or meaning of a behavior. Obviously Herodotus didn’t take a Scythian “vapour bath” himself, otherwise he would have known the Scyths were howling for pleasure because they were as high as kites on *cannibis sativa*.

Due to their belief in an afterlife, Scythian tombs were well stocked with expensive Greek wine cellars, hemp seeds and “incense” (sic) paraphernalia. Both alcohol abuse and dope smoking were common in Scythian culture. Some archaeologists have suggested the Scythians got high before going into battle. Personally, I feel these substances were merely used by the Scythians as recreational activities, diversions especially during the long winters when they would have spent a lot of time in their tents or yurts. The Scythians were indeed a fun-loving people. Archaeologists have even found the apparent remains of an ancient board game in a Siberian tomb!³²



The Scythic Military Machine



Scythian Warriors - Bowman <https://arkaim.co/gallery>

Although the ancient Greeks and others might have mocked the Scythians as wild party animals, and overly sentimental, bragging buffoons while under the influence, when sobered up, armed, and in the saddle, their military prowess commanded respect and inspired fear from all who came into contact with them.

The Scythians loved their weapons and carried them with them wherever they went—especially when calling on a powerful neighbouring potentate! As preserved in stone relief carvings, evidently the Persian court officials couldn't persuade the Saka nobles to check their weapons at the door when participating in a formal tributary procession before the king at Persepolis! Archaeologists have discovered more ancient weapons of the Scythians than that of any other ancient people. In life and death it would appear the Scythians were literally armed to the teeth. They would have been staunch supporters of the U.S. Second Amendment's "right to keep

and bear arms."

Even the most humble of Scythian graves is furnished with a distinctive Scythic reflex composite bow and a good supply of arrows. Some tombs had as many as 1,000 arrows, and each one being individually decorated in red or black paint with a stylized flying snake or feather. These relatively small bows were made with a wooden core having its ends reinforced with plates of bone secured by wrapped and glued bindings of horsehair string. The time needed to construct a new bow from cutting the wood to the final decoration was at least five years due to aging and curing requirements. The Scythians also made larger bows of about three feet. The longest range of these bows seems to have been about 1,640 feet or 500 meters.

Sakas carried their bows and arrows in a *gorytus*. This unique Scythic invention was a sort of combination holster-quiver that hung from their belts on the left side (Both Scythians and Parthians typically shot from the left although they were ambidextrous). These holsters were covered with leather or even gold and were decorated sumptuously in intricate detail with zoomorphic and geometric forms. The arrow compartment could be closed with a flap to protect the feathering from moisture. Besides different sizes of bows, the Saka had different types of arrows, including incendiary arrows, and often carried at least two *goryti* with them.

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The Scythian archery equipment is of professional quality, a reflection on the horseback archers who could shoot with accuracy an estimated 20 arrows a minute! This clarifies the literary description of an ancient battle opening with a “cloud of arrows.”

Was the bow and arrow unknown to ancient Israel? The northern Israelite tribal confederation was led by Ephraim. The Scriptures pointedly mention that the Ephraimite warrior’s principle offensive weapon was the bow (cf. Psalm 78:9). On his death bed the patriarch Israel pronounced this prophetic blessing upon the children of Joseph, the combined tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh:

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard. Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, who will help you (Genesis 49:22-25, NRSV).

The trademark Scythian arrowhead was a trefoil, having three barbs. To pull such razor sharp arrowheads out of a victim left a truly jagged wound. And if that was not nasty enough, in battle the Saka added to the psychological pressure on their enemies by using poison-coated arrowheads. The Greeks called the Scythic poison *scythicon* or *toxicon*.³³ This poison was a wicked combination of decayed poisonous snakes and rotten blood aged in a dung heap. If a man

wounded by such a poisoned arrow was not killed outright, the snake venom might get him in less than an hour. But if he survived that, there was always the gangrene and tetanus to finish the job. The Greek poet Ovid vividly described the terror of such arrows:

Some fall, pitifully shot down by hooked arrows; for a poisonous juice clings to the flying metal, which promises a double death.³⁴

Besides their bows, the Saka warrior elite brought with them lances, spears, long and short swords, single and double-bladed battle axes, chain flails, maces, whips, and scalping-decapitation knives. For souvenirs and bragging rights, a Saka took scalps and tanned them to hang as decorations on his horse. Also, to share in a battle’s spoils, a Saka warrior had to present his chieftain with at least one enemy head. The Scyths had a real cottage industry turning enemy skulls into gold mounted drinking mugs.³⁵



Well-armed Scythians - weaponsandwarfare.com

³³ Rolle, p. 65.

³⁴ Ovid, *Tristia* V, 10, cited by Rolle, p. 65.

³⁵ Piotrovsky, Galanina, Grach, p. 13; Rice, p. 54.

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Evidently, this made things easier for party hosts who could count on everyone to bring his own cup and ice-breaking conversation piece. Archaeologists note that the Celts also had this head-taking custom.³⁶

Such a weapons' list and grisly habits do not fit the previously held view of the Saka as being lightly armed cavalry who merely conducted hit-and-run raids, but avoided tough hand-to-hand combat. The Scythians wore heavily armoured coats of scale armour, helmets, armoured breeches for thighs, knee and shin greaves, heavy fighting belts trimmed with iron. Their relatively small iron plated shields could be slung on the warriors' backs or to a side, leaving both hands free for action. Scythic weaponry was often decorated with gold worked in floral or geometric motifs. Combined with their colourfully decked out horses, a Scythian heavy cavalry charge must have presented an awesome and exotic if chilling sight.

The most recent excavations have revealed several "iron knights," skeletons covered almost from head to toe in iron scales, with their shields by their sides.³⁷

No one questions today that the Scythians fielded heavily armed cavalry. They were warriors for whom courage and ability to fight were highly prized. A Saka king personally led his army into battle even when he was 90 years old, as was the Scythian king Ateas when he fell in battle with Philip II of Macedonia in 339 B.C.



Hair Comb Scythian Battle — <https://radiolemborg.com/>

³⁶ The head count was an old Near Eastern custom in which severed heads were carefully piled up before the king as illustrated in Assyrian relief carvings. "Such headhunting was of course practised far beyond this region—for instance in Central Europe among Celts and Germanic tribes," Rolle, p. 82.

³⁷ Rolle, p. 68.

Scythian Religious Customs

When it came to their religious observances, the Scythians had a number of practices that struck the Greek historian Herodotus as unusual by the standards of his day (450 B.C). Herodotus visited Scythia about 270 years after the first appearance of the Saka. While his observations were fairly accurate, he didn't always discern the correct explanation or origin for what he saw as per his account on Scythian "vapor baths."



Wood Brush Altar and Sword.

According to Herodotus, there was no concept of holy ground or sacred location in Scythia. Led by their political leaders or soothsayers, the Saka would arrange a rendezvous at some location for a ceremony or sacrifice, and then depart. But no place seemed to be any better than another.

Herodotus said that as far as religious expression was concerned, the Scythian culture was *devoid* of images, altars and temples—with only one exception. The Scyths reconstructed yearly an enormous altar of brush wood that could only be ascended on one side. On top of this steppe land altar they fixed a wood platform into which they stuck an antique iron sword (it was an antique even in Herodotus' day). This was to represent a "Lord of War," which Herodotus identified for his Greek audience as Ares. In the solemn presence of this sword they then offered sacrifices from their herds. They also poured libations of wine on the heads of some prisoners taken in war and then killed them, collecting the

blood and pouring it upon the altar. Of course as already mentioned, the Saka *did not* keep pigs and *never* sacrificed them, a practice notably different from Hellenic culture.

In later centuries Greeks and others gradually influenced late Scythian culture so that some towns came to have "high places" to worship various Greek-style deities.³⁸ Most scholars believe the Saka worshipped the elements of nature in their various forms. Also the "great goddess," commonly worshipped throughout the ancient Near East, seems to have been popular with a lot of the Scythians. This "great goddess" was often represented with her upper torso like a woman and her lower body like a snake.

But initially, the Saka fervently revered the customs of their ancestors, and remained faithful to what the scholars assume were their original "tribal deities." Any one who adopted an alien

³⁸ Rice, p. 86.

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religious practice was considered a traitor. It was the offender's family who were responsible to execute the guilty party immediately upon discovery. Whether king or commoner the punishment for what the Scythians considered apostasy was death. Herodotus wrote several stories of kings and nobles who were killed for "aping of foreign customs and intercourse with the Hellenes."³⁹

There was an abundance of soothsayers in Scythic society. The Saka held them in high esteem, but their position was always tenuous. A soothsayer who forecast a wrong future—a lying diviner—was burnt alive, and all his male relatives executed. The soothsayers used a divining method that involved examining the inner bark of the linden tree.

They take a piece of this bark, and, splitting it into three strips, keep twining the strips about their fingers, and untwining them, while they prophesy.⁴⁰

Do any of these customs have parallels among the ancient Hebrews? Or perhaps were those traditions the garbled, confused interpretations of a rebellious, syncretistic people who relied on the oral traditions preserved by soothsayers?

The Hebrews were originally taught that it was forbidden to make idols for worship (cf. Exodus 20:4-5). At Herodotus' time the Saka evidently had some semblance of this teaching. Avoidance of images and swine's flesh were unusual customs among ancient peoples. Combined, these two traits indicate a link between the Hebrews and the Saka.

Regarding the Scythian renown for judging any Saka who tried to introduce a foreign god or religious practice as being guilty of a treason worthy of death, from the days of Moses the Hebrews had the same teaching (cf. Deuteronomy 13:6-11). The biblical instruction held true whether the apostate was an individual or a whole community (vv. 12-15).

The Hebrew concept of holy ground was intimately connected with the presence of God (cf. Exodus 3:5). During the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, holy ground was linked with the Ark of the Covenant, upon which the LORD sat on the mercy seat. This ark was placed in the Temple at Jerusalem. Jeroboam I had tried to make "holy ground" out of Bethel and Dan in the Ten Tribe confederation by placing idols there. But all the true prophets of God condemned this practice as sin. There was no holy ground amongst the Ten Tribes, neither did the Saka consider any place among them as "holy ground."

The Saka "Lord of War" had a direct parallel in the Hebrews' LORD of Hosts, the Lord of Heaven's armies:

Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" He replied, "Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped (Joshua 5:13-14, NRSV).

³⁹ Piotrovsky, Galanina, Grach, p14.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *The History*, cited by *From the Land of the Scythians*, p. 137. "Their soothsayers foretold the future by means of bundles of twigs and by splitting bast fibres in much the same way as did certain groups of Germans in the Middle Ages," Rice, p. 85.

Joshua was one of the most famous men of the tribe of Ephraim, the leading tribe in the Ten Tribe confederation of Israel. Could the antique sword used by the Saka at their annual sacrifice have had some connection with a prominent ancient personality? Even the slaughter of enemy prisoners by a religious personality at a time of sacrifice had biblical correspondents (cf. 1 Samuel 15:17-32; 1 Kings 18:20-40).



Asherah - Queen of Heaven Mother Goddess
Inanna, Cybele, Ishtar, Astarte, Artemis, Tanit, Tabiti (Scythian)

A major false worship common among the ancient Ten Tribes of Israel was the adoration of Asherah, introduced officially into Israel by Jezebel and Ahab. Asherah was also called “goddess” and “holy.” The Phoenician colony of Carthage, which was founded by Jezebel’s family, worshipped a derivative of Asherah called “Tanit,” whose name means “She of the serpent.”⁴¹ Here is the connection to the “great goddess” woman-snake of the Scythians, Tabiti. This ancient near-eastern religious tradition is one the Scythians carried with them to their northern homeland. Their syncretistic worship continued to be a blending of Canaanite and Hebrew deities and religious practices.

The God of Israel forbade his people to consult soothsayers, mediums, or sorcerers (cf. Deuteronomy 18:10, 14). But the northern Ten Tribes didn’t pay heed to this instruction. Their toleration of divination was listed as one of the reasons God sent them into exile (cf. 2 Kings 17:17). Both the prophets Isaiah and Micah, who lived contemporaneously with the destruction of the political Kingdom of Israel, castigated the house of Jacob for its abundant soothsayers (Isaiah 2:6; Micah 5:12).

Does the historical, cultural, and religious evidence link the Saka Scythians with the Lost Ten Tribes of Hebrews? The clues tantalize. Yet there is still more to consider.

⁴¹ *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, “Asherah,” p. 74.