

The yurt-dwelling nomads of Tuva, herding sheep, and wandering across the vastness of the steppes, seem to have been there for ever. But if you dig in Tuva and other areas of Central Asia, you may find traces of an earlier, gold-rich, war-like culture whose stunning art mixed the fabulous with the domestic.

The nomadic Scythian culture stretched right across the steppes of Central Asia from the Crimea in southern Russia to Western China, and dates from around 700BCE to 0CE.

Genetic tests on human remains found in graves show the Scythians were of mixed blood, but mostly of Iranian and European origin, with some individuals having a more Asian heritage.

It appears, however, that they shared a common spoken language (although there was no written one), and maintained well-used trade routes that connected Eastern Europe to China.

They were expert horsemen, being some of the earliest peoples to ride and use horse-drawn wagons, in which they sometimes lived - a little like gypsy caravans. This skill with horses was how they maintained their vast empire and kept the trade routes open.

Although they were nomadic, the Scythians had a single king-like leader, to whom different clan chieftains paid homage. They were expert warriors, and their rich elite wore bronze helmets and chain-mail, with round shields made of leather, wood, or iron, often decorated with a central gold ornament in the form of an animal.

They used a double-curved bow, shooting over their horse's left shoulder, and also swords, the sheaths of which were often encased in embossed goldwork with ivory or gem-stone inlays. Many carried spears with bronze terminals depicting real or mythical beasts.

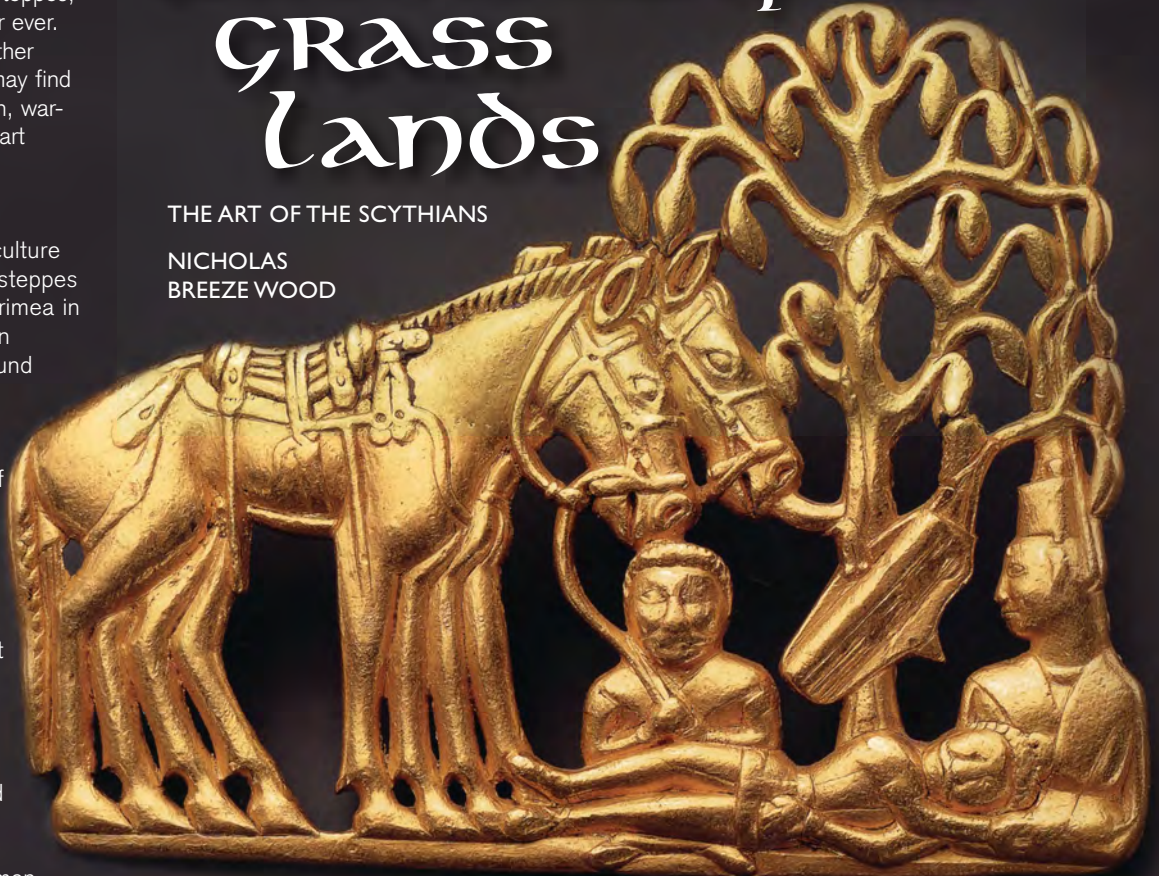
And underneath all the splendidly crafted gold, bronze-work and ornate costumes, the Scythians also decorated themselves with intricate zoomorphic tattoos.

The Scythian's horses were also often dressed in beautiful and

GOLDEN RIDERS OF THE GRASS LANDS

THE ART OF THE SCYTHIANS

NICHOLAS
BREEZE WOOD



ornate costumes, with gilded bridles, bits and saddles; many parts of which have survived in graves excavated from the often frozen ground.

These frozen tombs are found in Tuva, areas of Southern Russia, Kazakhstan and other places across the Eurasian plains.

Because the graves are often frozen in perma-frost, the weapons and domestic items, jewellery,

clothing, textiles and even the remains of the deceased are often in an incredible state of preservation.

SHOCK AND AWE

Their extreme war-likeness generated much fear and fame with the surrounding

Top: two Scythian lovers sit under a tree, the man's head in the woman's lap; their horses are held by a servant. Gold belt ornament C4-5th BCE. Southern Siberia

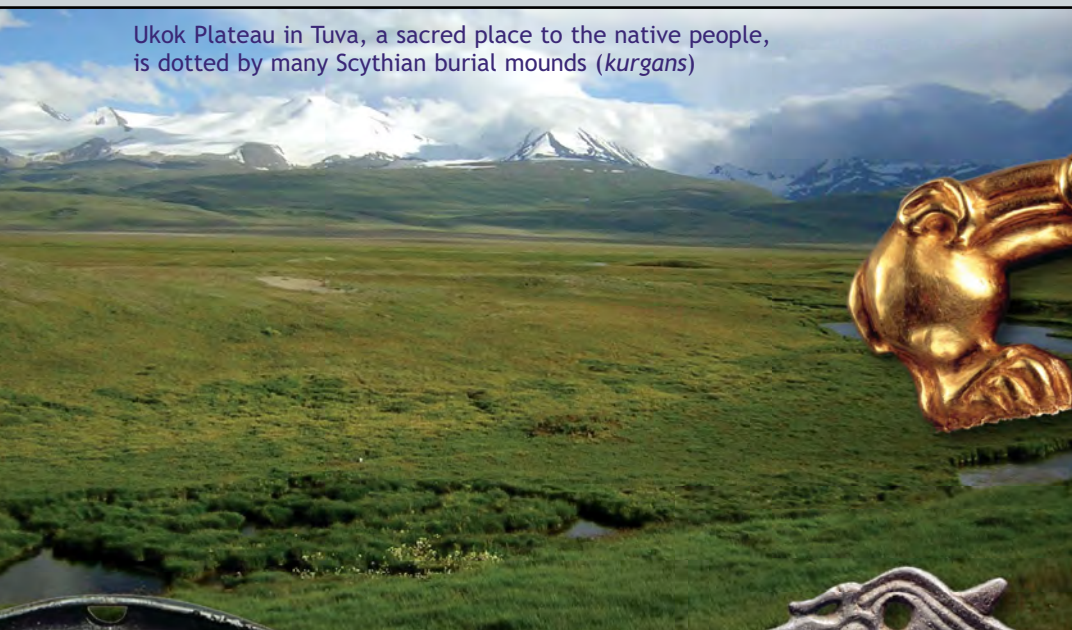
The wooded hills and valleys of the Tuvan steppes



Left: Golden griffin's head C4th BCE. Southern Russia



Ukok Plateau in Tuva, a sacred place to the native people, is dotted by many Scythian burial mounds (*kurgans*)



Below: golden cat, probably a leopard. C4th BCE. Southern Russia

Centre: Bronze stag C4th BCE. Tuva



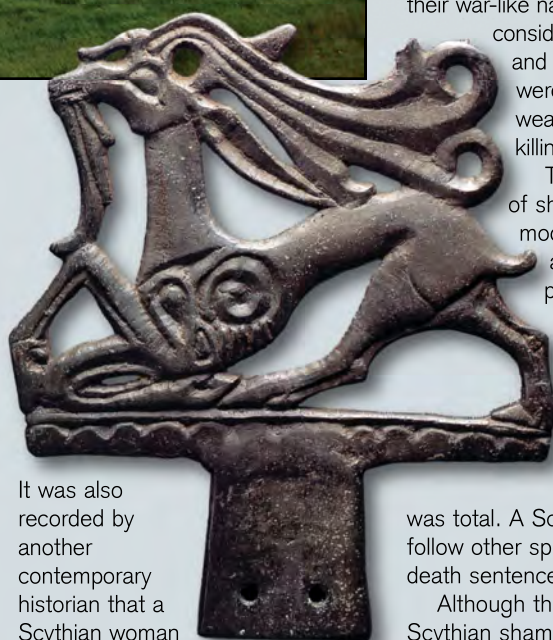
with shamans called *enaree* who they esteemed highly. Because of their war-like nature, weapons were considered sacred items, and special ceremonies were performed for any weapon capable of killing.

They made sacrifices of sheep and goats, like modern day Tuvans, but also sacrificed prisoners of war to the gods and spirits of the Three Worlds of the shaman's cosmos.

Loyalty to the culture's world view and spirituality was total. A Scythian wishing to follow other spiritual beliefs faced a death sentence.

Although the exact nature of Scythian shamanism is not known, the one thing that all historians remark on is their use of cannabis, especially in relationship to a cult of the dead, which was an important aspect of Scythian culture.

The stag seems to have been an important cultural animal, and many gold, bronze



It was also recorded by another contemporary historian that a Scythian woman had to kill three enemies in battle before she could wed.

ART AND SPIRIT

The Scythians were an animistic culture,

peoples.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, wrote: "The Scythian soldier scrapes the scalp clean of flesh and softening it by rubbing between the hands, uses it thenceforth as a napkin. The Scyth is proud of these scalps and hangs them from his bridle rein; the greater the number of such napkins that a man can show, the more highly is he esteemed among them. Many make themselves cloaks by sewing a quantity of these scalps together."

Scythians captured Persia, Syria and Judea and even reached the borders of Egypt, who quickly made a peace deal with them.

And it was not just the men who were to be feared; the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus wrote that Scythian women 'fight like the men and are nowise inferior to them in bravery'.



Above: back of bronze (shaman's) mirror, decorated with stags C7th-8th BCE. Tuva

Right: ritual cup with a bear-shaped handle. Carved from birch, the cup's shape has deformed over time C6th-7th BCE. Southern Russia





Left: bronze horse chest decoration of two camels fighting and biting C4th BCE. Southern Russia

from Pazyryk (see Sacred Hoop Issue 59)

THE CELTIC CONNECTION

Some of the famous tartan-clad, red-haired 'celtic' Tarim mummies, found in Xinjiang, China, date to the Scythian period, and if you compare Celtic and Scythian artwork you will often see striking similarities.

The exact origin of the Celts of Western Europe is not completely understood, but it is known that there was what is called a 'proto-celtic' culture in eastern Europe between around 700-450 BCE

Named after an archaeological site at Hallstatt, Austria; the Hallstatt Celts were expert metal workers, and like the Scythians, they were also expert horsemen.

wooden figures of them have been found. Other animals include the bear, wolf and eagle; and of course, their beloved horses.

Despite their appalling violence and war-like nature, they were the creators of stunningly beautiful artifacts.



Above: very Celtic-looking golden antelope C4th BCE. Southern Russia

Left: a golden wolf carries a sheep's head in its jaws C4th BCE. Southern Russia

The Scythians were expert smiths, sometimes making objects of solid gold or bronze, or sometimes wrapping beautifully carved wooden objects in gold foil. It needs to be remembered when looking at their material culture that they were nomadic, and this makes the results of their craft even more spectacular.

The world's very first carpets have also been found frozen in Scythian tombs, especially those



Left: carved cedar wood stag with stiff leather antlers C5th BCE. Tuva

Below: Scythian archer on a horse. C4th BCE. Southern Russia

Scythian burial mound (kurgan) at Pazyryk, Tuva

