

## The Royal Scythians

τὸν ἵππευτάν τ' Ἀμαζόνων στρατὸν  
 Μαιῶτιν ἀμφὶ πολυπόταμον  
 ἔβα δι' ἄξεινον οἶδμα λίμνας,  
 τίν' οὐκ ἀφ' Ἑλλανίας  
 ἄγορον ἁλίσας φίλων,  
 κόρας Ἀρείας πέπλων  
 χρυσεόστολον φάρος,  
 ζωστήρος ὀλεθρίου ἄγρας.  
 — Ἑυριπίδης, Ἡρακλῆς<sup>1</sup>

Against the mounted army of the Amazons  
 on both sides of many-streamed Maeotis  
 He coursed through the Sea, hostile swelling of water,  
 having mustered a host of friends  
 From all over the lands of Hellas  
 to capture the gold-embroidered robe,  
 The tunic of the martial maiden:  
 a deadly hunt for a war-belt.<sup>2</sup>

—Euripides, *Heracles*

### The First Steppe Empire and Creation of the Silk Road

*With the perfection of equestrian skills and development of the techniques and life-style of mounted horse nomadism around the beginning of the first millennium BC,<sup>3</sup> the steppe zone core of Central Eurasia belonged to the Northern Iranians. In the middle of the millennium, the Scythians, the first historically well-known pastoral nomadic nation, migrated into the Western Steppe and established themselves there as a major power. Other steppe Iranians migrated eastward as far as China.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Euripides, *Heracles*, Greek edition by Gilbert Murray (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Eur.+Her.+408>). My rendering is a little free, partly due to the crux in the text, for which various solutions have been proposed.

<sup>2</sup> Sarmatian women warriors (who seem to have been the inspiration for the Amazons), like Scythian and Sarmatian male warriors, had heavy iron-armored fighting belts, as did the early Greeks themselves. See Rolle (1989). The “gold-embroidered robe” is also Central Eurasian.

<sup>3</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 21–24).

<sup>4</sup> Large areas of Siberia, deep into Mongolia, were anthropologically Europoid in High Antiquity, and only gradually became Mongolic during the first millennium BC, the turning point

*While the Scythians are best known as fierce warriors, their greatest accomplishment was the development of a trade system, described by Herodotus and other early Greek writers, that linked Greece, Persia, and the lands to the east and made the Scythians immensely wealthy. Their motivation was not greed, as historians from Antiquity up to the present have often attributed to Central Eurasians. From later periods about which more is known, it is clear that a major driving force behind their interest in trade was the need to support their sociopolitical infrastructure, which was built around the person of the ruler and his comitatus, or oath-sworn guard corps, whose members numbered in the thousands. A bustling land-based international commerce developed in Central Eurasia as a direct result of the trade interests of the Scythians, Sogdians, Hsiung-nu, and other early Central Eurasians. These interests are explicitly mentioned in the early Greek and Chinese sources. Although some long-distance trade had existed for millennia, it only became a significant economic force under the Scythians and other steppe Iranians and their successors. Because the Central Eurasians traded with people on their borders whoever they were, they traded with the civilizations of Europe, the Near East, South Asia and East Asia and indirectly connected the peripheral cultures to each other through Central Eurasia.*

*During the heyday of Scythian power, the peripheral city-state cultures of High Antiquity also reached their apogee. The fact that the classic philosophical works in the ancient Greek, Indic, and Chinese languages were produced at about the same time has long intrigued scholars, suggesting the possibility that there was some interchange of ideas among these cultures already in that period. The existence of Central Eurasian philosophers has generally been overlooked.*

*The Scythians' empire and trade network in the Western Steppe constituted a template for subsequent, increasingly powerful states based in Central Eurasia. The growth in wealth and power of Central Eurasians, and their increasing contact with peripheral cultures, led to invasions by peripheral states—usually justified by claims that the Central Eurasians had invaded them first. The earliest known invasions are by the Chou Dynasty Chinese, who defeated the people of Kuei-fang in two battles in 979 BC and captured*

being around the fifth or fourth century BC (Rolle 1989: 56); Eastern Central Asia (East Turkistan) remained Europoid, and Indo-European in language, until late in the first millennium AD. On the early peoples of the Eastern Steppe, most of whom have not yet been identified ethnolinguistically, see Di Cosmo (2002a).

more than 13,000 people, including four chiefs (who were executed) and much booty.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese repeatedly invaded the Eastern Steppe at every opportunity from then on<sup>6</sup> down to modern times. The Achaemenid Persians under Darius conquered Bactria and Sogdiana and then invaded Scythia in circa 514–512 BC. The Macedonians and Greeks under Alexander invaded Central Asia in the late fourth century BC. The latter two conquests had very strong repercussions for the cultures of Central Asia.

### Iranian State Formation in Central Eurasia and Iran

The Iranian domination of Central Eurasia must have begun before circa 1600 BC, when the Group B Indo-Europeans appeared in upper Mesopotamia and the Greek Aegean, and members of the same group also moved into India and China. Although the earliest evidence for simple steppe nomadism goes back to the third millennium BC, perhaps as an adaptation to the fact that the region is climatically unsuited to intensive agriculture, on the basis of archaeology, as well as the earliest historical and linguistic evidence, it is now agreed that the *horse-mounted* pastoral nomadic life-style was developed by the Iranians of the steppe zone early in the first millennium BC.<sup>7</sup> While this does not precede the earliest clear evidence for horse riding by anyone anywhere, the steppe Iranians do seem to be the first people who took to riding as a normal activity, not something undertaken only by daredevils and acrobats.<sup>8</sup> Despite the polemics by specialists in the ancient Near East, it is unusually difficult to believe that the Indo-Europeans—who probably first domesticated the horse and in any case are the first people

known from ancient Near Eastern sources to be expert in the use of horses—were the last to learn how to ride them. The first people who are known to have relied nearly exclusively on the mounted archer in warfare were Central Eurasian Iranians, who for centuries maintained their superiority in this kind of warfare.<sup>9</sup>

Persians are mentioned in ninth-century BC Assyrian sources,<sup>10</sup> but the first solid, clear historical accounts of Iranian-speaking peoples are in connection with the Medes and Scythians a century later.

In the late eighth century BC the Medes, an Iranian people, established a kingdom in and east of the Elburz Mountains of northwestern Iran. They were major opponents of the Assyrians in the early seventh century, but at that point the Cimmerians and the Scythians invaded Media and dominated or actually took control of the kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

The Scythians were a Northern (or “East”) Iranian people. According to Herodotus (born 484 BC), who actually visited the city of Olbia (located at the mouth of the Bug River) and other places in Scythia,<sup>12</sup> they called themselves *Scoloti*. They were called *Saka* by the Persians and, in Assyrian, *Iškuzai* or *Aškuzai*. All of these names represent the same underlying name as the Greek form *Scytha-*, namely Northern Iranian \*Skuša ‘archer’.<sup>13</sup> It is the name of all of the Northern Iranian peoples living between the Greeks in the West and the Chinese in the East.

The Cimmerians, a little-known steppe people thought to have been Iranians, entered the ancient Near East in the late eighth century BC, where they defeated Urartu in 714 BC. They then attacked the Phrygians to the west

<sup>5</sup> Di Cosmo (1999a: 919).

<sup>6</sup> Di Cosmo details the wars against the Ti, who were divided into White Ti (Pai Ti) in the west and Red Ti (Ch’ih Ti) in the east, and comments, “The most vicious wars against the Ti were those waged by the state of Chin, bent on a campaign of annihilation that eventually paid off in 594 and 593 B.C., with the destruction of several Ch’ih Ti groups. This attack probably took place in conjunction with an internal crisis of the Ti, as there is evidence of famine and political dissent among them” (Di Cosmo 1999a: 947–951; Romanization changed to the modified Wade-Giles system used in this book and Di Cosmo’s 2002a book). He also notes an invasion of the White Ti in 530 BC recorded in the *Ch’un-ch’iu* (Di Cosmo 2002a: 97 et seq.); other sources claim that the Ti were subjugated by Chin in 541 BC. However, they continued to exist and periodically regained independence, struggling with the Chinese down to the mid-third century BC (Di Cosmo 1999a: 948, 951).

<sup>7</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 21–24).

<sup>8</sup> See the excellent treatment by Drews (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Arguments to the contrary are highly doubtful. However, more archaeological work is needed to settle the problem of the periodization of the development of mounted warfare in Central Eurasia.

<sup>10</sup> The earliest apparent historical reference to Iranians “occurs in the ninth century when in 835 BC the Assyrian king Shalmaneser received tribute from the twenty-seven tribes of the *Paršuwaš*, which is generally thought to indicate the Persians” (EIEC 311). The earliest *potential* references to Indo-Iranians are in Shang Chinese accounts of wars with the Ch’iang people and in references to the Chou Chinese and their Chiang allies. Although the name Ch’iang/Chiang could be a transcription of a Tokharian word (see appendix B), it could also be a blanket category label for foreigners skilled with war chariots. The dates and the connection with chariots both suggest they were Indo-Europeans, perhaps of Group B—which would rule out Iranians.

<sup>11</sup> On the Cimmerians according to Herodotus, see endnote 50.

<sup>12</sup> Rolle (1989: 12–13).

<sup>13</sup> Ultimately from Proto-Indo-European \*skud-o ‘shooter, archer’ (Szemerényi 1980: 17, 21). See appendix B.

and destroyed their kingdom in around 696 BC, but were subsequently defeated by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BC). Although the Cimmerians next defeated and killed the Lydian king, Gyges, in battle in 652, they were themselves crushed shortly afterward by the Scythians under their king Madûês<sup>14</sup> in the 630s. According to Herodotus, the Scythians “invaded Asia in their pursuit of the Cimmerians, and made an end of the power of the Medes, who were the rulers of Asia before the coming of the Scythians.”<sup>15</sup> This account sounds remarkably similar to that of later Central Eurasian state-foundation conflicts, including that of the Hsiung-nu versus the \*Tok\*ar, the Huns versus the Goths, and the Turks versus the Avars.

The Scythians were involved in wars all across the ancient Near East, from Anatolia to Egypt, usually (perhaps always) in alliance with the Assyrians or others. “In Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, in the sites of the 7th to the beginning of the 6th centuries B.C., particularly in the defensive walls of towns, bronze arrowheads of the Scythian type have been found—the direct result of invasions and sieges.” The Scythians also left their arrowheads in the clay walls of the northern Urartian fortress of Karmir-Blur (near Yerevan), which they destroyed.<sup>16</sup> Finally the Medes crushed the Scythians around 585 BC.<sup>17</sup> The surviving Scythians retreated back north.

The Medes subsequently joined with the Babylonians in a successful attack on Assyria that led to the destruction of the Assyrian Empire. Shortly before 585 BC, the Medes destroyed the remnants of the Urartian state to their northwest and extended their realm as far as western Anatolia and northern Syria,<sup>18</sup> but they were in turn conquered in 553 or 550 BC by the Persian leader Cyrus (r. 559–530), who absorbed the whole Median kingdom and essentially merged his realm with it, founding the Persian Empire.<sup>19</sup> Under Cyrus the Persians took Iran and Anatolia and, in 539, at-

tacked the Babylonians, defeating them and incorporating the entire Near East except for Egypt and Arabia into the empire. Cyrus then invaded Central Asia, where he died in battle in 530 or 529 against the Massagetae, a North Iranian people whose queen, following steppe custom, made a trophy out of his skull.<sup>20</sup>

### The Western Steppe: The Scythians and Sarmatians

The Cimmerians, who the Greeks say were the inhabitants of the Pontic Steppe before the Scythians, are mentioned in Near Eastern sources before and during the Scythian period there but are otherwise little known. After their defeat by the Medes, the Scythians retreated back into the North Caucasus Steppe. Having acquired from the Medes, Urartians, Assyrians, and other peoples in the ancient Near East much wealth, knowledge about absolute monarchy, and experience in war, they used their skills to subjugate the people there—probably including their own Iranian relatives—and establish an empire that soon stretched across the entire Western Steppe north of the Black Sea, from the Caucasus west as far as the Danube. The western part of this territory included vast agricultural lands farmed by Thracians.

From their base in the steppe, the Scythians further developed a long-distance trade network, described by Herodotus, that they found already in place. With their discovery that the Greeks living in their colonial towns on the Black Sea coast—and as far away as Greece—would pay gold for grain, the Scythians began an extremely profitable business.<sup>21</sup> Their appetite for luxuries, especially gold, grew rapidly. The Scythian royal burials were filled with beautifully crafted golden treasures in the Scythian animal style, some of which escaped tomb robbers and now grace the museums of Russia and Ukraine. Because gold is not native to the area of Scythia, all of it was

<sup>14</sup> In Herodotus, Μαδύης (r. 645–615?), son of Πρωτοθύης (Bartatua, r. 675–645?).

<sup>15</sup> Godley (1972: 198–199); cf. Rawlinson (1992: 58–59, 295).

<sup>16</sup> Melyukova (1990: 100). One Scythian alliance with the Assyrians is known in some detail; see Rolle (1989: 71–72).

<sup>17</sup> Szemerényi (1980: 6).

<sup>18</sup> Van de Mieroop (2004: 254–257).

<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Medes, who apparently did not develop a writing system for their own language or maintain archives in any other language, the Persians used Imperial Aramaic, a Semitic literary language, and Elamite, another local Near Eastern language. Under Darius, they also developed an alphabetic cuneiform writing system for their own language, Old Persian, and used it for monumental inscriptions. This Western Iranian language is quite different from

the putatively earliest Iranian language, Avestan, which is not actually localizable in place or time but is strikingly similar to Vedic Sanskrit. See appendix A.

<sup>20</sup> Rolle (1989: 96).

<sup>21</sup> Strabo (Jones 1924: 242–243) goes on at some length about the productivity of the land cultivated by the Scythian farmers (the Georgi) and the fabulous amounts of grain shipped to Greece during the great famine (ca. 360 BC). He also mentions the Greek importation of salted fish from Maeotis (the Sea of Azov).

imported, mostly from great distances, including as far as the Altai Mountains, as archaeology has revealed.<sup>22</sup> This particular gold route thus constituted a considerable part of early east-west transcontinental trade.

As mentioned earlier, the Scythians' sociopolitical practices included the *comitatus*, the apparent ritual sacrifice of which in one instance is vividly described by Herodotus and has been confirmed to some extent by archaeology.<sup>23</sup>

The Scythian Empire is said by Herodotus to have consisted of several peoples,<sup>24</sup> of which he gives differing accounts. The national origin myth he relates purports to explain the division of the Scythians into three branches:<sup>25</sup>

There appeared in this country, being then a desert, a man whose name was Targitaus. His parents, they say . . . were Zeus and a daughter of the river Borysthenes [the Dnieper]. Such (it is said) was Targitaus' lineage; and he had three sons, Lipoxaïs, Arpoxaïs, and \*Skoloxaïs,<sup>26</sup> youngest of the three. In the time of their rule (so the story goes) there fell down from the sky into Scythia certain implements, all of gold, namely, a plough, a yoke, a sword, and a drinking cup.<sup>27</sup> The eldest of them, seeing this, came near with intent to take them; but the gold began to burn as he came, and he ceased from his essay; then the second approached, and the gold did again as before; when these two had been driven away by the burning of the gold, last came the youngest brother, and the burning was quenched at his approach; so he took the gold to his own house. At this his elder brothers saw how matters stood, and made over the whole royal power to the youngest.<sup>28</sup>

Lipoxaïs, it is said, was the father of the Scythian clan called Auchatae; Arpoxaïs, the second brother, of those called Katiari and Traspian;

the youngest, who was king, of those called Paralatae. All these together bear the name of Skoloti, after their king \*Skoloxaïs; "Scythians" is a name given them by Greeks.<sup>29</sup>

The explanation of the four implements given by Herodotus is undoubtedly mistaken, based on his own text. Despite the youngest son's possession of the gold objects, the four implements clearly correspond to the four peoples subsequently divided up among the three sons. They also correspond to the occupations of the four Scythian peoples given below in his own text: the plow for the Plowing Scythians, the yoke for the Husbandmen, and the sword for the Royal Scythians, which leaves the drinking cup for the Nomad Scythians.<sup>30</sup>

Herodotus and all other sources agree that the nation as a whole was ruled by the Royal Scythians, the warriors who controlled most of the wealth. They were "the largest and bravest of the Scythian tribes, which looks upon all the other tribes in the light of slaves." Below them were the Nomad Scythians, who were perhaps simply the nomadic Scythians who did not belong to the royal clan; the Husbandmen, called Borysthenites by the Greeks; and the Plowing Scythians, agriculturalists who grew grain "not for their own use, but for sale." The localization of these peoples on Scythian territory, though described by Herodotus, is not well established, but the Crimea and the region to the west of it (southern Ukraine), where the rich soil has remained highly productive down to the present day, was occupied primarily by agriculturalists, while the eastern part, which is still largely open grassland, was occupied by the pastoral nomads.

In addition, Herodotus describes a great number of other peoples, Scythian, part-Scythian, and non-Scythian, living within the Scythian realm, such as "the Callippidae, who are Scythian Greeks, and beyond them another tribe called Alazones; these and the Callippidae, though in other matters they live like the Scythians, sow and eat corn, and onions, garlic, lentils,

<sup>22</sup> Rolle (1989: 52–53).

<sup>23</sup> Taylor (2003) remarks about one tumulus within Scythia, "The recent re-excavation and analysis demonstrates the existence of complex rituals around the edge of the mound, with a further grave (1/84) and concentrations of horse bones that should perhaps be seen in connection with a final rite of closure (or incorporation), as Herodotus so clearly described."

<sup>24</sup> Or nations; for the terminology see note 46 in the prologue.

<sup>25</sup> Godley 1972: 202–205; cf. Rawlinson (1992: 296–297).

<sup>26</sup> The received text has *Coloxaïs*; see appendix B.

<sup>27</sup> Godley has "flask" here; I have substituted the usual translation 'cup'.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion of this myth in the prologue.

<sup>29</sup> This passage has generated much confusion about the name and identity of the Scythians; see appendix B.

<sup>30</sup> Legrand, citing Benveniste, says, "Ces objets sont les symboles des trois classes des sociétés iraniennes; la coupe, de celle des prêtres; la sagaris, —une sorte de hache ( . . . ),—de celle des guerriers; la charrue et la joug réunis (le joug servant à atteler la charrue), de celle des agriculteurs" (Legrand 1949: 50). Rolle (1989: 123) says, based on "written sources," that the Scythians had three kings who ruled simultaneously, one of them being a *primus inter pares*. However, the historical accounts of Scythian rulers, who present them very clearly as sole monarchs, do not support this.

and millet. Above the Alazones dwell Scythian tillers of the land, who sow corn not for eating but for selling; north of these the Neuri; to the north of the Neuri the land is uninhabited as far as we know."<sup>31</sup> Archaeological studies indicate that some of these and perhaps other peoples in the Scythian realm were not Northern Iranian in culture but Thracian, and probably spoke Thracian or other non-Iranian languages.

Despite the factual complexity, theoretically Scythian society was divided into four peoples plus the ruler: an ideal organization typical of Central Eurasian states at least as late as the Mongol Empire. It is also notable that the dominant people considered all the others as their "slaves."<sup>32</sup> This view was shared by other peoples in Central Eurasia later on as well.

Herodotus<sup>33</sup> describes the Scythians as "pure nomads":

I praise not the Scythians in all respects, but in this greatest matter they have so devised that none who attacks them can escape, and none can catch them if they desire not to be found. For when men have no established cities or fortresses, but all are house-bearers and mounted archers, living not by tilling the soil but by cattle-rearing and carrying their dwellings on waggon, <sup>34</sup> how should these not be invincible and unapproachable? This invention they have made in a land which suits their purpose and has rivers which are their allies; for their country is level and grassy and well watered and rivers run through it not much less in number than the canals of Egypt.

The account of Herodotus is the earliest surviving narrative description of any Central Eurasian nomadic people in any source, but already it contains elements of the misleading stereotype that has dominated histories of Cen-

tral Eurasians down to the present day. Herodotus, like other peripheral culture authors of his time and later, was fascinated by nomadism. He does not say much about the extensive agriculture that went on in the Scythian realm. He also neglects to explain why the Scythians maintained the cities he comments on, in particular Gelonus, which was located at the northern edge of the steppe in the territory of the Budini, another of the many "Scythian nations" he describes:

The Budini are a great and numerous nation; the eyes of all of them are very bright, and they are red-haired. They have a city built of wood, called Gelonus. The wall of it is thirty furlongs [stadia] in length on each side of the city; this wall is high and all of wood; and their houses are wooden, and their temples; for there are among them temples of Greek gods, furnished in Greek fashion with images and altars and shrines of wood; and they honour Dionysus every two years with festivals and revels. For the Geloni are by their origin Greeks, who left their trading ports to settle among the Budini; and they speak a language half Greek and half Scythian. But the Budini speak not the same language as the Geloni, nor is their manner of life the same. The Budini are native to the country; they are nomads, and the only people in these parts that eat fir-cones; the Geloni are tillers of the soil, eating grain and possessing gardens; they are wholly unlike the Budini in form and in complexion. Yet the Greeks call the Budini too Geloni; but this is wrong. All their country is thickly wooded with every kind of tree; in the depths of the forests there is a great and wide lake and marsh surrounded by reeds; otters are caught in it, and beavers.<sup>35</sup>

The city of Gelonus, or one more or less exactly like it, has been excavated by archaeologists at Belsk (Bilsk), on the northern edge of the steppe. It is a forty-square-kilometer settlement, and "the commanding ramparts [which are 20.5 miles long]<sup>36</sup> and remarkable extent of the site suggest a place of great importance. Strategically situated on the exact boundary of the steppe and forest-steppe, Gelonus could have controlled trade from

<sup>31</sup> Godley (1972: 216–219); cf. Rawlinson (1992: 302).

<sup>32</sup> The sole English term 'slave' for what was a complex hierarchy—most of the members of which would not be considered slaves by English speakers—is loaded with early modern connotations. See Beckwith (1984a).

<sup>33</sup> Godley (1972: 241–242); cf. Rawlinson (1992: 314–315).

<sup>34</sup> Strabo (Jones 1924: 222–223, 242–243) remarks somewhat later that the tents "on the wagons in which they spend their lives" were made of felt. They had huge numbers of them; a Scythian who had only one was considered poor; a rich man might have eighty wagons. They were mostly pulled by oxen and moved at the slow speed of these grazing animals. For further discussion and pictures showing archaeologically recovered clay models (apparently toys) of these tent-wagons, see Rolle (1989: 114–115). Strabo also emphasizes that the nomads lived on the milk, meat, and cheese from their herds, "from time to time moving to other places that have grass." He explicitly notes that although they were warriors, the nomads were basically peaceful and only went to war when absolutely necessary. See the epilogue.

<sup>35</sup> Godley (1972: 308–309); cf. Rawlinson (1992: 339). For Godley's "ruddy" (referring to the Budini's hair) I have substituted "red-haired"; for his "native to the soil" I have substituted "native to the country."

<sup>36</sup> Rolle (1989: 119).

north to south. The presence of craft workshops and large amounts of imported Greek pottery, dating from the fifth and fourth centuries BC, suggest that it did.”<sup>37</sup>

The attention of the Persians and Greeks was surely drawn by the prosperity of the Scythians, not their martial prowess, which would obviously have been a good reason for *not* invading them. It was hardly any desire for vengeance that induced Darius to consider the conquest of Scythia, as Herodotus claims, but the belief that Scythia was worth conquering.

Darius (r. 521–486) usurped the throne during the civil war between Cyrus’s successor Cambyses and his brother. He greatly expanded the frontiers of the Persian Empire to include Egypt in the southwest, northwestern India in the southeast, and Central Asia in the northeast. He met resistance in the north from the steppe Iranians—the Sakas and Scythians<sup>38</sup>—and in the west from the Greeks. After defeating the Sakas or “Asian Scythians,” and capturing their king, Skuka, in 520–519 BC,<sup>39</sup> he decided, against the advice of his counselors, to invade Scythia, home of the European Scythians, and subjugate it. Darius prepared by having a bridge of boats built across the Bosphorus to Thrace and ordered his Ionian Greek subjects to sail to the Danube and up the river to the point above where the mouths separate, and bridge it for him.

In 513–512 BC Darius marched a huge army—according to Herodotus, 700,000 men strong—across the Bosphorus and through Thrace, which he subdued as he went, until he reached the Danube.<sup>40</sup> He then crossed the river and marched eastward into Scythia, ordering his Ionian forces to guard the bridge until he returned. The Persians chased the Scythians across the empty steppe, seeking to do battle with them, but the Scythians used the classic Central Eurasian guerrilla warfare technique of feinting and withdrawing,<sup>41</sup> which forced the Persians to march deeper and deeper into

Scythian lands, where they found no cities to conquer and no supplies to commandeer. In frustration, Darius sent a message to the ruler of the Scythians, Idanthyrsus, demanding that he stand and fight or simply surrender. The Scythian replied, according to Herodotus:

It is thus with me, Persian: I have never fled for fear of any man, nor do I now flee from you; this that I have done is no new thing or other than my practice in peace. But as to the reason why I do not straightway fight with you, this too I will tell you. For we Scythians have no towns or planted lands, that we might meet you the sooner in battle, fearing lest the one be taken or the other wasted. But if nothing will serve you but fighting straightway, we have the graves of our fathers; come, find these and essay to destroy them; then shall you know whether we will fight you for those graves or no. Till then we will not join battle unless we think it good.<sup>42</sup>

Darius ended up retreating, having built a few fortresses in his progress across Scythia. He had accomplished nothing except the further strengthening of the Scythians’ reputation as a great warrior nation.

The wars of Darius and his successors against the Greeks continued down to the time of the Macedonian prince Alexander the Great. After subduing the Levant and Egypt, Alexander turned to the Persian Empire in 334 BC. He finally defeated Darius III (r. 336–331 BC) and after the latter’s death in 330 BC in Central Asia, Alexander had himself proclaimed Persian emperor. He had conquered the entire Persian Empire, including Bactria and Sogdiana. To cement his control of the Central Asian region, he married Roxana (Roxane), a Bactrian noblewoman, in 327.

Alexander does not seem to have planned an invasion of Scythia, perhaps due to the military difficulties involved. His army consisted largely of highly trained Macedonian and Greek foot soldiers, whose phalanx formation was difficult for any enemy to overcome, but his cavalry was small. The only way to subdue a fully mobile nomadic nation was with a full-sized nomadic-style cavalry. His limited mounted forces could not have taken on a large nomadic army fighting in its home territory. Despite the undoubted advantage that his cavalry gave him in flanking movements in sedentary Near Eastern battles, Alexander would have faced the same problem Darius encountered.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor (2003); cf. Rolle (1989: 117–122) on this and other Scythian urban sites.

<sup>38</sup> The Persians referred to all Northern Iranian peoples, including the Scythians, as *Saka* (q.v. appendix B). Modern scholars have mostly used the name *Saka* to refer to Iranians of the Eastern Steppe and Tarim Basin. I have usually followed this practice.

<sup>39</sup> Rolle (1989: 7).

<sup>40</sup> The dates and locations of the campaign(s) are disputed. According to Melyukova (1990: 101), the Persians crossed the Don and entered the territory of the Sarmatians, but this would seem to be unlikely on the basis of the account by Herodotus.

<sup>41</sup> It is now well known that the Scythians and other Central Eurasian steppe peoples wore armor in battle. It is attested both literarily and archaeologically. See Rolle (1989) for discussion and numerous pictures of Scythian armor.

<sup>42</sup> Godley (1972: 326–328); cf. Rawlinson (1992: 346–347).

The successors of the Scythians, the Sarmatians (in Greek, Σαυρομάται 'Sauromatians'), spoke a Northern Iranian language akin to Scythian. They were notable for the great prominence of women in general and especially for the presence among them of women warriors. According to Herodotus they were called *Oiorpata* 'man slayers' in the Scythian language.<sup>43</sup> The unusual status of women, which was markedly different from the extremely androcentric Scythian and Greek cultures, was noticed by Herodotus and has received solid confirmation by archaeology. Although the tale he recounts about the Sarmatians' origin as a cross of Scythian boys and Amazon women is probably just an entertaining story, it is likely that the Greek legends about the race of Amazons are based on the real-life Sarmatian women warriors. In the last couple of centuries BC, the Sarmatians came into contact, and conflict, with the Romans.

### The Eastern Steppe: The Hsiung-nu

At the eastern end of the steppe zone, in what is now Mongolia, former Inner Mongolia, and the eastern Tarim Basin, the nomadic-dominant form of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex became an established life-style between the eighth and seventh centuries BC,<sup>44</sup> chronologically parallel to its establishment in the Western Steppe. Archaeologists have established a solid chronology, confirmed by dendrochronology, for the spread of this Early Iron Age culture across the steppe zone of Central Eurasia from the Western Steppe north of the Black Sea to the eastern Altai region of the Mongolian Plateau.<sup>45</sup> Archaeology has also confirmed the conclusions of philologists and historians on the ethnolinguistic identity of the early peoples of the Eastern Steppe zone. The dominant people in the western part of it, from the Altai of western Mongolia<sup>46</sup> south through the Kroraina area around the Lop Nor to the Ch'i-lien Mountains, the northern outliers of the Tibetan Pla-

teau, were Caucasoid in race; those in the northern region seem to have spoken North Iranian "Saka" languages or dialects, while those in the Kroraina area spoke Tokharian languages or dialects. The dominant peoples in the eastern part, including the central and eastern Mongolian Plateau, Inner Mongolia, and southwestern Manchuria, were racially Mongoloid peoples who spoke unknown languages.<sup>47</sup> The Chinese sources mention that the cities near the northern frontier of the Chinese cultural zone were involved in trade with the foreign peoples.

The Chinese invaded the Ti in the late seventh and early sixth centuries, but little more is known about them until the end of the Warring States period, when King Wu-ling (r. 325–299 BC) of the northern state of Chao ordered his people to adopt nomadic-style clothing and customs and to practice horsemanship.<sup>48</sup> He defeated the Central Eurasian peoples known as the Lin Hu<sup>49</sup> and Loufan and built a great wall from Tai at the foot of the Yin Shan (the mountain range on the north side of the great bend of the Yellow River) to Kao-ch'üeh, where he built the commanderies of Yün-chung, Yen-men, and Tai.<sup>50</sup> After defeating Chung-shan in 295 BC, Chao enclosed the entire great bend of the Yellow River in a ring of fortifications. The kingdom thus substantially expanded its territory and established control over the southern part of the Eastern Steppe, including the Ordos, the best pasturelands in the region.

Sometime shortly before the state of Ch'in conquered the last of the post-Chou Dynasty warring kingdoms and unified the Central States under the Ch'in Dynasty in 221 BC, the people who ruled the Eastern Steppe, including the Ordos, were known as the Hsiung-nu. The Ch'in general Meng T'ien attacked and crushed them in 215 BC, and the First Emperor of Ch'in built the Great Wall. He conscripted hundreds of thousands of Chinese, who linked together the many old walls built against each other and against their neighbors by the Chao, other Chinese, and non-Chinese. The wall and line of fortifications stretched from Lin-t'ao in Kansu to Liao-tung and enclosed the entire Yellow River valley, including the former Hsiung-nu homeland. The Hsiung-nu, under their first known leader and apparent founder, T'ou-man

<sup>43</sup> Godley (1972: 310–311); Herodotus explains that "in Scythian a man is *oior* and to kill is *pata*." Scythian *oior* (the Greek transcription perhaps representing a Scythian [wior]) is an obvious cognate of Avestan *vīra* 'man; human', Sanskrit *virá-* 'hero; man; husband', Latin *vir* 'man', Old English *wer* 'man, husband', Gothic *wair* 'man', etc., all from Proto-Indo-European \**wi-ro-* 'man' (EIEC 366).

<sup>44</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 57, 65, 71).

<sup>45</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 36).

<sup>46</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 39).

<sup>47</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 39, 163–166).

<sup>48</sup> See the extensive discussion in Di Cosmo (2002a: 134–138). Other than the adoption of trousers, however, the perennial Chinese weakness with respect to horses and cavalry indicates that the king did not revolutionize China's military in the long run.

<sup>49</sup> This is one of the earliest datable uses of *Hu*, a term for foreigners of the north and west that seems originally to have been an ethnonym but became quasi-generic quite early.

<sup>50</sup> Di Cosmo (1999a: 961).



(\*Tumen), fled north beyond the frontier into the Mongolian Plateau.<sup>51</sup> It is likely that his son, Mo-tun, rose to power in 209 BC as a consequence of this devastating defeat.<sup>52</sup>

The Hsiung-nu have often been identified with the Huns of Europe, despite the gap of several centuries between the periods in which the two flourished and the lack of any known direct connection.<sup>53</sup> Although some clever arguments have been made, mostly based on the apparent similarity of the names,<sup>54</sup> one of the basic problems is that their name, which is now pronounced Hsiung-nu in modern Mandarin Chinese, from Middle Chinese \*χoŋnu or \*χ'ioŋnu,<sup>55</sup> must have been pronounced quite differently at the time the Chinese on the northern frontier first learned of this people and transcribed their name. Among other possibilities, the name could correspond to a form of the name of the Northern Iranians,<sup>56</sup> eastern forms of which—*Saka*, *Sakla*, and so forth—are recorded in several guises in Chinese<sup>57</sup> accounts about a century younger<sup>58</sup> than the first references to the Hsiung-nu. Whatever the Hsiung-nu ended up becoming by the fall of the Hsiung-nu Empire, it is probable that they either learned the Iranian nomadic model by serving for a time as subjects of an Iranian steppe zone people, as in the First Story

model (the most likely scenario), or they included an Iranian component when they started out, and like many other peoples in Central Eurasia, such as the Tibetans, were known by a foreign name applied by others to them.<sup>59</sup>

The Ch'in conquest was short-lived. The Ch'in Dynasty collapsed shortly after the death of the First Emperor, and during the following civil war in China the conscripts who had been sent to the frontier abandoned their posts and returned home. The Hsiung-nu then returned to their homeland in the Ordos.

Chinese knowledge of the Eastern Steppe greatly increased during the following Han Dynasty, especially under the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 BC), who is responsible for the long-lasting expansion of the Chinese Empire into Central Eurasia.

### Intellectual Development in Classical Antiquity

In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, at the same time as the emergence of the Silk Road and the early nomad states of Central Eurasia, the peripheral city-state cultures of High Antiquity reached their apogee and produced the classic philosophical and other literary works in the ancient Greek, Indic, and Chinese languages. Socrates (469–399 BC), Plato (427–347 BC), and Aristotle (384–322 BC) were—very roughly—the contemporaries of Gautama Buddha (perhaps fl. ca. 500 BC), Pāṇini (perhaps fifth century BC),<sup>60</sup> and Kauṭilya (fl. ca. 321–296 BC)<sup>61</sup> as well as Confucius (ca. 550–480 BC),<sup>62</sup> Lao-tzu (perhaps late fifth century BC), and Chuang Tzu (fourth century BC).<sup>63</sup> The idea of any cross-fertilization among these three cultures has generally been dismissed out of hand by historians, largely because it has been extremely difficult to demonstrate many *specific* borrowings back and forth. Nevertheless, there are some, and it must furthermore be considered odd if such distant areas as East Asia and the Aegean—in which the people evidently knew little

<sup>51</sup> Di Cosmo (2002a: 174–176, 186–187).

<sup>52</sup> Yü (1990: 120). The overthrow of T'ou-man (\*Tumen) took place only six years after his defeat by Meng T'ien. The actual history of Mo-tun's rise to power seems unlikely to have resembled the fascinating but largely legendary story related in the prologue, though his comitatus—his highly trained, personally loyal bodyguard—was certainly involved, as noted by Di Cosmo (2002a: 186).

<sup>53</sup> Although some tantalizing arguments have been made on the basis of archaeological artifacts, they do not solve the severe chronological and other problems.

<sup>54</sup> On the debate over the origins of the Hsiung-nu and their putative historical connection with the Huns, see endnote 51.

<sup>55</sup> Pulleyblank (1991: 346, 227) reconstructs 匈奴 Middle Chinese \*χuawŋno. Baxter (1992: 798, 779) has \*χ'ioŋnu (based on homophones he cites), but Pulleyblank's reconstruction better reflects the “spellings” in the *Ch'ieh-yün*. As for Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin), the name is spelled *xiōngnú* in the pinyin romanization system, but actually it is pronounced [χ'ioŋnu].

<sup>56</sup> The transcription of the name Hsiung-nu is early and was certainly done via an Old Chinese frontier dialect, so that the original \*s- initial was probably transcribed before the change of Old Chinese \*s- to \*χ-. For details, see endnote 52.

<sup>57</sup> See appendix B. For forms of the name Saka in eastern Eurasia, see endnote 53.

<sup>58</sup> They evidently go back to the reports of the envoy and explorer Chang Ch'ien, who was sent to find the Yüeh-chih (\*Tok\*ar) in 139–138 BC but was caught and detained on the way there and again on the way back. He only escaped back to China in 126 BC, along with his Hsiung-nu wife and his former slave. For a translation of the account of his journey in the *Shih chi*, see Watson (1961, II: 264 et seq.).

<sup>59</sup> The problem of the ethnolinguistic affiliation of the Hsiung-nu is still very far from settled.

<sup>60</sup> Coward and Kunjunni Raja (1990: 4).

<sup>61</sup> Bilimoria (1998: 220–222).

<sup>62</sup> This is my estimate, based on the discussion of his chronology given by E. Bruce Brooks (<http://www.umass.edu/wsp/results/dates/confucius.html>).

<sup>63</sup> Most of these dates are disputed. I have taken the unnoted dates from Audi (1999). Most of the texts involved are accretional, so only parts of them could have been composed by their nominal authors.



more about each other at the time than their predecessors had a millennium earlier when they acquired literacy—should suddenly have started arguing not only about their actual governments but about *government* in general, asking questions about their existence, and talking about logic and looking into the way the human mind works. Surely the contrast with the previous millennium is striking. That was a period when questions were asked about uncertainties such as whether the king's wife would conceive or not, whether the gods would look down with favor upon the sacrifices offered to them, or whether the next kingdom could be safely attacked or not. The asking of questions *about the questions themselves* was new, and it is difficult to find the precedents or motivation for the development in each case.

The three areas had some political features in common—notably, each culture was shared among a large number of small states, none of which could completely dominate the others. They also shared, indirectly, the effects of the increase in world trade brought about by the development of the nomadic empires. Growth of commerce virtually always entails growth of a commercial class and the spread of foreign ideas. As noted above, it has not yet been demonstrated that there was any significant direct intellectual relationship between early China and early Greece (or India). This is not surprising, because there seems not to have been any direct connection of any kind between those two cultures, and it is quite possible that none will ever be found. Yet the question must be asked: how did the philosophical period of Classical Antiquity happen? It would seem extremely unlikely that three distant cultures should virtually simultaneously have developed similar intellectual interests and have come up with similar answers in some instances. If a positive solution to this problem is conceivable, it must involve Central Eurasia.

The only means of contact among those three cultures at that time in history was overland. As shown throughout this book, however, Central Eurasia was not simply a conduit for goods to and from East Asia and Western Europe. It was an economy and world of its own, with many subregions, nations, states, and cultures. Confucius is said to have remarked that if a ruler has lost knowledge of good government, he should “study it among the foreign peoples of the four directions.”<sup>64</sup> Alexander the Great's conquest and colonization of

Bactria in the fourth century BC introduced Greek culture, including Greek philosophy, into the heart of Central Asia. A recent careful study has shown that specific elements derived from the Greek philosophical tradition first appear in Chinese literature shortly after Alexander's conquest.<sup>65</sup>

Early Classical Greece, India, and China were at the time still merely small appendages outside the vast territory of Central Eurasian culture, which bordered on all three of them. In the sixth and early fifth centuries BC, more or less the entire northern steppe zone, and much of the southern, Central Asian zone, was Iranian-speaking. There were at least two important philosophers or religious thinkers from early Central Eurasia. Anacharsis the Scythian had a Greek mother and spoke and wrote Greek. According to Diogenes Laertius, in the 47th Olympiad (591–588 BC) he traveled to Greece, where he became well known for his abstemiousness and pithy remarks.<sup>66</sup> He was counted as one of the Seven Sages of Antiquity by the Greeks and is considered to be one of the early Cynics.<sup>67</sup> The famous Demosthenes, grandson of a rich Scythian woman, was often accused of being a *barbarian*.<sup>68</sup> Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism, is widely believed to have come from the area of Khwarizmia, though some other Central Eurasian region inhabited by pastoral Iranians is perhaps just as likely. His dates are unknown, but he could well have been a contemporary of Confucius and Buddha.<sup>69</sup> Were there others? Did the Classical philosophers of the peripheral cultures reflect not only their own ideas but those of the philosophers of Central Eurasian Indo-Iranian peoples? According to one ancient Chinese text, Confucius believed the Central Eurasians had the answers, and some of the Greeks seem to have had similar opinions. Is there any basis for such opinions? Do the social and religious ideas of Central Eurasians, including the importance of friendship and the beliefs behind the *comitatus*, imply philosophical positions or interests, such as the quest for happiness, or the perfect state?

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the result is an extremely odd *lectio difficilior* with irregular scansion. Yang's edition does not tell us which other versions of the text had or have only *one* 官; nor, so far as I noticed, does he say what any of these texts' positions are on the stemma. Once again, the lack of a true *critical edition* leaves us in the dark. For an example of a critical edition of a Chinese text—the only one I have ever seen—see the model work by Thompson (1979), and note especially Thompson's remarks in his preface.

<sup>65</sup> Brooks (1999).

<sup>66</sup> Hicks (1980, I: 104–111).

<sup>67</sup> Cancik and Schneider (1996: 639).

<sup>68</sup> Rolle (1989: 13).

<sup>69</sup> On one problem with the “high” dates for him, see appendix A, on Avestan.

<sup>64</sup> According to the *Tso-chuan*, in the seventeenth year of the Duke of Chao 昭 (Yang 1990: 1389). The whole quote runs: 吾聞之，天子失官，學在四夷。Although the standard *Tso-chuan* edition I cite here, by Yang Po-chün, has a doubled 官 character (i.e., his text has 吾聞之，天子失官，官學在四夷)，which he supports with citations of early texts and commentaries,

## The Nomadic Form of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex

The rise, flourishing, and disappearance of the famous transcontinental commercial system known collectively as the Silk Road chronologically parallels, exactly, the rise of the Scythians, the flourishing of the independent Central Eurasian empires, and the destruction of the Junghars. In that two-millennium-long period, most of Central Eurasia proper was dominated by nomad-warrior-ruled states that depended primarily on trade in order to accumulate wealth, as attested by ancient and medieval sources in the languages surrounding Central Eurasia.

Trade was important for both nomadic and non-nomadic cultures, but it was critical for the nomadic states. The crucial nature of trade was not, however, because of the supposed poverty of the nomads.<sup>70</sup> Nomads were in general much better fed and led much easier, longer lives, than the inhabitants of the large agricultural states. There was a constant drain of people escaping from China into the realms of the Eastern Steppe, where they did not hesitate to proclaim the superiority of the nomadic life-style. Similarly, many Greeks and Romans joined the Huns and other Central Eurasian peoples, where they lived better and were treated better than they had been back home. Central Eurasian peoples knew that it was far more profitable to trade and tax than it was to raid and destroy. Historical examples of the latter activity are the exception rather than the rule and are usually a consequence of open war.

The reason trade was so important to the nomadic peoples seems rather to have been the necessity of supporting the ruler and his *comitatus*, the cost of which is attested by archaeological excavations and by historical descriptions of the wealth lavished on *comitatus* members across Central Eurasia from Antiquity onward. The ruler-*comitatus* relationship was the sociopolitical foundation stone of all states throughout Central Eurasia, whatever their life-style, until well into the Middle Ages. Without it, the ruler would not have been able to maintain himself on the throne in this life and would have been defenseless against his enemies in the next life. The sumptuous burials of Central Eurasian rulers from the Scythians through

<sup>70</sup> For example, Hildinger (2001) claims that “historically, nomads have lived in appalling poverty, at the very margin of life, and this poverty can be mitigated only by contact with settled peoples.” The exact opposite was true, as is pointed out in ancient and medieval travelers’ accounts, many of which have been translated into English.

the Mongols display their belief in the afterlife and desire to enjoy it the same way they had this life.

Both the Greeks, especially through the *History* of Herodotus and the accounts of Alexander’s campaigns, and the Chinese, beginning with the reports of Chang Ch’ien at the time of Emperor Wu, provide fairly accurate descriptions of Central Eurasian cities. Herodotus tells us that the main city of Scythia, Gelonus, was thirty kilometers square and the commercial center of the Scythian trade network. The city of Bactra, later Balkh, the greatest urban center of Bactriana and seat of the Achaemenid satrap,<sup>71</sup> was taken by Alexander in 329–327 BC,<sup>72</sup> two centuries before its conquest by the Tokharians. He also took Maracanda (Samarkand, the main city of Sogdiana) in 329 BC and established his power as far as Ferghana. Between 139 and 122 BC Chang Ch’ien traveled across Eastern Central Asia and visited many cities, which he or his successors describe in some detail. All of the Central Asian cities depended primarily on irrigated agriculture in the valleys and alluvial fans of the Central Asian rivers, most of which begin in the mountains and end in the desert. Yet, despite their urbanity, the peoples there were just as warlike or non-warlike as the nomads—who were just as interested in trade as the urban peoples—and each of the great lords among both peoples maintained a *comitatus*. The ancient Chinese travelers to Sogdiana found it an intensely cultivated agricultural region with many cities and huge numbers of warriors. The Sogdians, no less than the nomadic peoples around them, needed to trade to acquire the wealth to bestow on their *comitatus* members; it was clearly not the reverse. They needed their warriors for their internal political purposes, just as the nomads did. In the early medieval period, the *comitatus* was evidently more widespread among the Sogdians and other settled Central Asians than among any other Central Eurasian people, and the Sogdians were as involved in wars within Central Eurasia and in the peripheral states as the nomadic peoples were.<sup>73</sup> There is no reason to think the situation was any different in Antiquity.

<sup>71</sup> A number of documents from Bactria written in Imperial Aramaic, dating to the fourth century, have recently been discovered. They will shed much light on the local administration and other details of the culture in Bactria during this period (Shaked 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Hornblower and Spawforth (2003: 58).

<sup>73</sup> Grenet (2005), Moribe (2005), de la Vaissière (2005a).

# EMPIRES OF THE SILK ROAD

A History of Central Eurasia

from the Bronze Age

to the Present



CHRISTOPHER I. BECKWITH

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