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Introduction

About 2,700 years ago, mounted Scythian warriors raced across the steppe zone of ancient Central Eurasia, southeast to the Yellow River and the region that became Chao in North China, southwest into Central Asia and Media, and west to the Danube and Central Europe. They created the world's first huge empire. Though their feat was largely duplicated by the Hun Empire of Late Antiquity,¹ the Türk² Empire of the Early Middle Ages, and the Mongol Empire of the Central Middle Ages, the Scythians did it first.

But did their empire last long enough to effect any changes? Did the Scythians contribute anything to world civilization beyond “better bows and arrows” and some rather spectacular gold sculptures? What about their language, religious ideas, socio-political system, and so on? Some speak as if there really was no actual historical Scythian nation at all. They speak only of *savage tribes* randomly attacking peaceful neighbors such as the Chinese and Romans, who are presented as “higher”, civilized people forced to conquer the evil, *predatory barbarians* and take their land.

That is not an imaginary construct. It is the current dominant view in history writing on Central Eurasia, including on the Scythians. We

1. See Endnote 4.

2. Following convention, the spelling *Türk* is used for the early people who founded early medieval empires based in what is now Mongolia, and in particular for their ruling clan the Aršilaš 'Arya Kings' (Beckwith 2016b, q.v. Endnote 95). The generic spelling with *u* is used only in anglicized forms or for later Turkic peoples, Turkish, the Turkic languages, etc.

have long been told that we cannot expect anything good from *barbarians*, who are traditionally defined as being barely human, worthless from the beginning.³ Herodotus, the ancient Greek ‘father of history’, is often quoted for negative views on the Scythians. He says of Scythian rule in Media, “the whole land was ruined because of their violence and their pride, for, besides exacting from each the tribute which was assessed, they rode about the land carrying off everyone’s possessions.”⁴ Yet he also gives other, very different accounts of them, some quite positive. In fact, he sometimes purposely presents several views or reports on the same subject, such as his versions of the Scythian national foundation myth. However, in other cases he contradicts and even argues with “himself” on the Scythians and many other topics. That does not show that he was insane (as has actually been suggested), but that his text has been altered by later caretakers of his book, the *Histories*, who argue back and forth with each other in it about different points. Most modern scholars treat the surviving Classical text as if it was essentially perfect (other than a few minor textual errors), despite being transmitted to us by scribes for most of the last two and a half millennia, so scholars are free to pick and choose between the many contradictory passages written by “Herodotus”.⁵ Not surprisingly, they have mostly preferred to follow *this* “Herodotus”, who says bad things about the Scythians, instead of the *other* “Herodotus” who says mainly good or at least neutral things about the Scythians.⁶ Unfortunately, we do not know for certain which passages the historical person Herodotus wrote. Nevertheless, the pernicious modern view of the Scythians as evil *barbarians* is not only wrong, it is so tenacious that it has supported the

3. On the continued use of the pejorative term *barbarian* and the ideas connected to it, see Beckwith (2009: 320–362).

4. Herodotus (i 106,1), from Perseus, tr. Godley. Diakonoff (1985: 108) follows this: “The Scythians seem to have merely plundered the countries conquered by them and levied contributions, being incapable of creating a firm state order of their own.”

5. The text of Herodotus contains many clearly unintended contradictions and other known errors; it is hardly perfect. Such textual problems reflect the existence of non-authorial changes. See also Endnote 5.

6. See Endnote 5.

continued misreading of Herodotus and it has prevented recognition of the Scythians' remarkably positive impact on the development of culture in much of Eurasia in Antiquity.

In fact, the Scythian Empire is one of the least known but most influential realms in all of world history. We actually have more data on it now than in the past when most educated people knew more or less who the Scythians were, but today, other than archaeologists, very few scholars work on Scythians, and no one speaks about a "Scythian Empire". Yet as shown in this book, the Scythians, alone, created an unprecedented, stable, loose-reined government structure, "the Empire", best known from its Middle East satrapy, which ruled for several centuries, mostly rather peacefully, until the conquest of Alexander the Great, who continued that same government structure.

A few earlier studies have already proposed that the Scythians had a revolutionary impact on the Ancient Near East.⁷ But how, exactly, did they have such an effect on an already long civilized world region, with great peoples such as the Egyptians and Babylonians and significant innovations of their own? If the Scythians were so great, why do old maps nevertheless *not* mark the vast steppe zone from the Yellow River to the Danube, 'Here there be Scythians'? What happened to the Scythians?

And those who are interested in East Asia might ask, did they have a similar revolutionary impact on the ancient Chinese?

This book answers these questions, as well as a surprising number of unasked ones that came to light while working on the original ones, including questions about the Scythian language and Scythian philosophy.

The Scythian language is minimally attested—under that name—from the early Scythian Empire migration period down to late Antiquity, when the regional dialects finally became distinct "Middle Iranian" daughter languages and developed written forms. Nevertheless, we do have some data. Significantly for history, the *geographical distribution* of the Scythian language, as attested in inscriptions, literary texts, loanwords, and the daughter languages, constitutes invaluable "linguistic archaeological" material that reveals many things about its long-gone

7. Most clearly and openly, Vogelsang (1992).

speakers, including where, when, and how they spoke it, and in some cases, what they thought.

Studying the earliest known teachers of philosophy, who were all Scythian emigrants living outside Scythia, unexpectedly reveals the specific philosophical ideas that produced the Age of Philosophy, the hallmark of the Classical Age.

The Scythians turn out to be more fascinating, creative, and important than anyone, including this writer, ever suspected. They were unlike any other culture of Antiquity when they started out, but by the time they were done they had changed the world to be like them in many respects. It is time to rewrite the histories and revise the old maps.

The descriptions of the culture and accomplishments of the Scythians and their offspring in this book are based mostly on hard data—ancient historical records, various kinds of language material, and visual evidence, mainly sculptural—that has survived from Antiquity. It reconsiders the key participants and events in the *traditional* view of ancient history. That view has largely reversed the attested directionality of the chief innovations of the Classical Age so as to attribute them to the age-old riverine agricultural civilizations of the periphery. Reexamination of the innovations shows that they came, rather, from Central Eurasia, thanks to the Scythians.

The Prologue surveys some of these major cultural changes that took place at the end of the Archaic period and beginning of the Classical period. They are attested in different kinds of data studied by scholars of art and archaeology, history, languages and linguistics, and other fields.

Subsequent chapters discuss the historical circumstances surrounding the spread of particular Scythian cultural elements both in Central Eurasia and, especially, in peripheral regions that were for a time parts of the Scythian Empire. The best attested such region became the Scytho-Mede Empire, which was expanded by Cyrus the Great and his son Cambyses, followed by the Persian Empire of Darius the Great. It was thus, more precisely, the Scytho-Mede-Persian Empire. Virtually the same developments took place on the territory of the early Chinese-speaking peoples in the region east of the great northern bend of the Yellow River, especially the Classical state of Chao (*Zhào*), and the first

Chinese Empire founded by prince Cheng (*Zhèng*) of Chao and Ch'in (*Qín*), better known as Ch'in shih huang ti (*Qín Shíhuángdì*) 'the First Emperor'.

Because the Scythians were the first historically known people to directly connect all of the major regions that produced Classical civilizations in Eurasia, some of the topics covered in this book have been discussed in locally focused historical studies, including monographs, collections of source material, and individual articles, altogether providing analyses of problems and extensive bibliographies. The scholarship on quite a few such topics is vast, even when the subject is limited to a lesser known disciplinary field. In such cases this writer's goal has been at most to nudge the scholarly ship a little, to move it in the right direction. However, other equally important historical topics, especially those relating to what the Scythians themselves accomplished, remain largely unstudied and unknown. They have turned out to be the most important and interesting of all, and constitute the main subject matter of this book.

The often wonderful historical, artistic, and philosophical material that has survived, in many languages, tells us much about the Scythians, who achieved truly stunning things and set in motion the dawning of the Classical Age of world civilization.

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