
SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 205

July, 2010

Nomad Culture, Greek Style: Steppes Jewellery and Adornment

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SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

FOUNDED 1986

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Figure 1. Apadama staircase, Persepolis (522–486 BCE) Scythian tribute-bearers.¹

One of the earliest images of Central Asian nomads can be found on the eastern staircase of the Apadama at Persepolis (figure 1). Built during the reign of Darius the Great (518–490), the southern wall shows a procession of tribute-bearers from some twenty-four satrapies of the vast Persian empire, which at this time stretched from Libya and Egypt in the West, to Uzbekistan and Pakistan in the East. Of all the tribute-bearers, only the Scythians or Saka Tigrakhauda (pointy-hat archers) were not subjects of Darius, and they alone come into his presence fully armed, their leader with both short sword and deeply curved bow. (Both ‘Scythian’ [Greek] and ‘Saka’ [Persian] derive from the nomad term ‘Skudat’, archer, as, in all probability, do the Han Chinese names for the closely-related Tocharian, Yuezhi, and Xiongnu peoples of Xinjiang and the Eastern Central Asian steppes.)² They wear pointed felt caps, tight caftans and trousers, all

¹ Livius <http://www.livius.org/a/iran/persepolis/persepolis.html>

² Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, Appendix B, Ancient Central Eurasian Ethnonyms.

similar to those found in the frozen graves of the Altai,³ or pictured on the electrum spherical vessel from the Kul Oba barrow in the Ukraine (Figure 2). Their tribute includes a horse, traditional costume and gold armbands, livestock, textiles and jewellery, all primary indicators of wealth and status among nomad cultures of the Eurasian steppes from the Black Sea to the borders of China. This paper looks at one aspect of nomad life, the jewellery they possessed, including belt buckles, decorative plaques, decorative elements of weapons, and the like, its significance within communities, its importance as art, and the extent to which it was modified by international style and fashion, particularly that of Greece.

³ N. V. Polosmak, and L. L. Barkova, *Costumes and Textiles of the Pazyryk Altai C4th–3rd BCE* (Novosybyrsk. Enfolio, 2005).



Figure 2. Spherical vessel with scenes from Scythian life; note felt cap on nomad on the far right. Kul Oba kurgan, Eastern Crimea, Ukraine, 400–350 BCE.⁴

Central Eurasia, the home of the Saka Scythians and related Indo-European speakers, is characterised by distinctive environmental zones: mountains, which contain and define regions, rivers descending from the mountains, often to lose themselves in such arid deserts as the Taklamakan, the Kara Kum and the Gobi, oasis regions such as Samarkand and Kashgar, and the vast, treeless steppes, which stretch from the Ukraine to Manchuria in a deep band split at the

⁴ Hermitage Museum Scythian gold collection: Available at http://hermitagemuseum.org/html/En/12/2004/hm12_1_19_00.html Accessed 12 Jan. 2010

center by the mountains of the Altai. In this region, two distinctive and interdependent cultures emerged, perhaps as early as 3000 BC,⁵ those of the nomadic pastoralists⁶ and the irrigation agriculturalists. Following migrations of proto-Indo-Eurasian-speaking peoples such as the wide-spread Afanasevo culture (3500–2500 BCE), whose archaeological remains are found in Siberia, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Kazakhstan, and who probably followed a semi-nomadic lifestyle,⁷ pastoral nomads colonised the steppes, and farmers settled and extended the riverine oases, eventually becoming skilled irrigation agriculturalists like the Sogdians and the Tocharians.⁸

Nomad cultures relied on skilled horsemen. Making use of riding horses, wagons and chariots, they pastured their flocks of sheep, camels, cows and goats across the steppes, utilizing the wool of their sheep for felts and carpets and both trading with and raiding the settled communities on their borders. Their principal weapon was the bow and arrow. The laminated, short, curved steppe bow was both ideal for use by a horseman and, according to a survey conducted by the *Scientific American* in the 1970s, rather more powerful than the English longbow. Generally conditions on the steppes determined that the cultural unit was a relatively small family-related group, with marital and trade connections to a larger tribal community, itself often part of a confederacy. Flexible and mobile, the tribe could come together for festivals, trading ventures, wars, and invasions. Tribal chiefs maintained their networks and their personal bodyguards (the *comitatus*) through gifts and sacrificial feasts.⁹

‘Chiefs’ first appeared in agricultural communities around 5500 BC, when cattle, sheep, and goats became widespread. Going by the evidence of early burials, such as those of Mariupol

⁵ David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. P. Mallory and Victor Mair, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Beckworth, *op. cit.*

on the Sea of Azov, they wore multiple belts and strings of polished shell beads, bone beads, beaver's tooth and horse tooth beads, boar's tusk pendants and caps, boar's tusk plates sewn to their clothing, pendants of crystal and porphyry, polished stone bracelets, and gleaming copper rings — they must have clacked and rustled as they walked.¹⁰ Excavation of the Maikop graves of circa 3500 BCE provided evidence of the importation of decorative and symbolic objects such as gold lions and bulls from the Near East and lapis beads from Afghanistan (figure 3), which suggests a thriving trading network.



Figure 3. Gold lion medallion from a Maikop kurgan, late 4th millennium BCE. Hermitage Museum collection, St. Petersburg.¹¹

¹⁰ Anthony, *op. cit.*, discussion of the Mariupol burials and the emergence of cultures able to keep livestock and of leaders able to give or sacrifice them as indicators of prestige.

¹¹ State Hermitage Museum Maikop collection. Available at http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/fcgi-bin/db2www/descrPage.mac/descrPage?selLang=English&indexClass=ARCHEOLOGICAL_EN&PID=34^30&numView=1&ID_NUM=27&thumbFile=%2Ftmplobs%2FY4_23KHO75V33H9ESC6.jpg&embViewVer=noEmb&comeFrom=quick&sorting=no&thumbId=6&numResults=51&tmCond=Maikop&searchIndex=TAGFILEN&author
Accessed 14 Jan. 2010.

The neighbouring, probably nomadic, Yamna Culture,¹² an early proto-Indo-European-speaking group, while less expensively decorative, had, on the evidence of its burials, also developed a chiefly culture.¹³ It was from this region that the Afanasevo migrations into Central Asia began, and with it the settlement of both oasis and steppes from the Ukraine to Xinjiang. Nomad lifestyle in many areas was interwoven with that of the irrigation agriculturalists of the oasis regions, and the two ways of life between them created an ideal interaction for long-distance trade.¹⁴

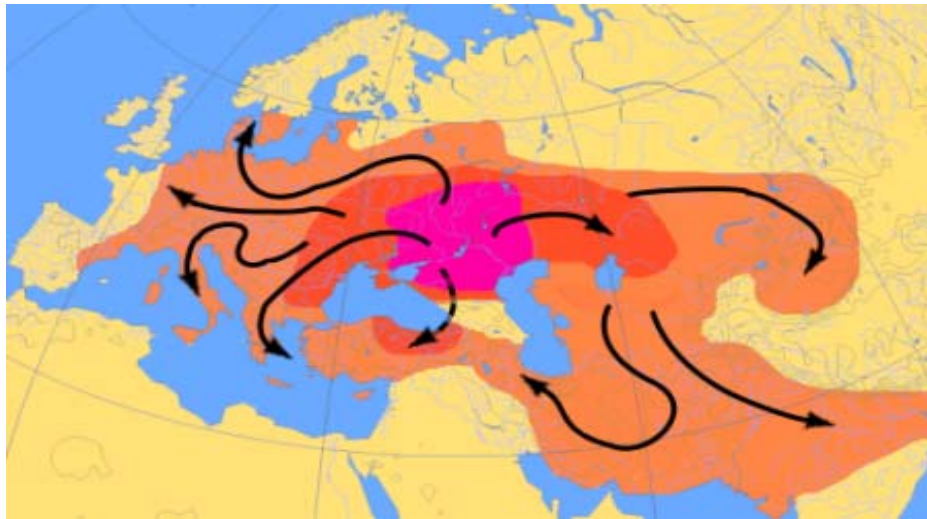


Figure 4. Proto-Indo-European migrations (Kurgan hypothesis).¹⁵

Most of the early nomads spoke an Indo-European language, related forms of which include Greek, Celtic, Sanskrit, Persian, and Tajik, and later groups spoke mostly Turkic languages such as Uighur, Turkish, or Uzbek. However, although there were frequent mass movements of nomadic peoples, often involving the creation of relatively short-lived steppe empires and the invasion of neighbouring cultures such as China, Persia, and India (figure 4), the

¹² Anthony, *op. cit.*

¹³ Pavel M. Dolukhanov, *The Early Slavs: Eastern Europe from the Initial Settlement to the Kievan Rus* (London: Longman, 1996)

¹⁴ J. P. Mallory, 'Yamna Culture,' [Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture](#) (Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997)

¹⁵ Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:IE_expansion.png Accessed 17 January 2010

basic life-style remained the same over centuries, and tribal groups were incorporated into new linguistic hegemonies rather than simply vanishing.¹⁶

Their principal object of trade was the horse, though raw gemstones, textiles, jewellery, and even steppes-grown wheat were all important. The Scythians, who entered the northern steppes region around 1000 BCE, developed a complex trading system which linked the civilizations of Europe, the Near East, South, Central and East Asia.¹⁷ The driving force behind this network was the need to support their socio-political structure of gift-based comitatus and inter-tribal loyalties with suitable, preferably gold jewellery.

While the Scythians were amazingly skilled craftsmen¹⁸ whose burial mounds have provided museums around the world with spectacular gold belt-buckles, bow-cases, and other objects (figure 5), gold itself was not native to the steppes, but was acquired through trade with other communities, notably the Greek settlements of the Black Sea and the Scythian-related cultures of the Altai mountains.¹⁹

¹⁶ Nicola di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

¹⁷ Beckwith, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ellen D. Reeder, *Scythian Gold: Treasures from Ancient Ukraine* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 1999). Recent research has largely debunked the earlier theory that many Ukrainian steppes examples of Scythian goldwork were created by Greek craftsmen.

¹⁹ Beckwith, op. cit.



Figure 5. Heavily adorned skeleton of a young Scythian woman C5th–4th BCE, Ukraine. Kurgan excavated in 1971.²⁰

Central to steppes culture, the Altai mountain range was not simply a source of raw gold, but a sacred zone that linked the nomads of Mongolia and the Ordos with those of Kazakhstan and the Ukraine. Grave good finds from this area include local jewellery, carpets and felts, Chinese silks and Persian woollen textiles, Greek-style lion heads and coffins carved with tigers. Generally nomad burials here and on both the eastern and the western steppes were in kurgans, lined pit graves that included horse and other sacrifices, covered by a large earth mound. Both men and women were buried in spectacular outfits decorated with gold plaques; they wore belts with elaborate buckles, torques, necklaces, rings, and armbands, and carried decorative weapons and bow-cases.²¹ Often their horses were equally bejewelled (figure 6), a custom that lasted well into the twentieth century in Central Asia.

²⁰ Frank Trippett, *The First Horsemen* (Nederland: Time-Life International, 1974)

²¹ Jeannine Davis-Kimball, Vladimir A Bashilov, and Leonid T. Yablonsky, eds., *Nomads of the Eurasian Steppes in*



Figure 6. Pazyryk, Altai, C5th BCE. Appliqué felt and leather saddle cover with griffin and ibex animal combat motif.²²

Power among the nomad tribes was vested in charismatic leaders who maintained both intertribal marital and political connections and a *comitatus*, which could consist of several thousand dedicated warriors. Loyalty was reinforced with gifts of portable wealth, the best horses and livestock, Chinese silks, the most spectacular jewellery. Poets acted as spin doctors, celebrating the lives of the leaders, and were richly rewarded.²³ Parallels can be found in Norse and Celtic customs; giving torques and armbands to members of the *comitatus* was obligatory (see *Beowulf*), and poets were also generally valued, though one disgruntled Irish bard wrote of his patron:

*I've heard it said of him many times
He doesn't give horses for ballads and rhymes.*

the Early Iron Age (Berkeley, Calif.: Zinat Press, 1995)

²² Available at: http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/ Accessed 17 Jan. 2010

²³ Anthony, *op. cit.*

*He gives what matches his soul anyhow;
A cow.*²⁴

Early steppes jewellery can be distinguished by several stylistic conventions; among these are combat themes, often between animals such as horse, deer, wolf, tiger, leopard and eagle; animal metamorphosis, where one species segues into another (figure 7) — deer antlers become eagle beaks, serpents grow wings, big cats have horns — sometimes leading to the creation of mythological species such as griffons and dragons; and the use of ‘s’ and ‘c’ curves to contort form and define musculature.²⁵



Figure 7. Bronze zoomorphic buckle with ibex and feline. Mongolia, C6th–5th BC.²⁶

In the Western steppes, from the Ukraine, across Kazakhstan, up into Siberia and to the western region of Xinjiang, a confederacy of tribes that Greek historians refer to as the Scythians

²⁴ Hubert Creekmore, ed., *Lyrics of the Middle Ages* (New York: Grove Press, 1959)

²⁵ Tamara Talbot Rice, *Ancient Arts of Central Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965)

²⁶ Hermitage collection available at: <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/cgi-bin/db> Accessed 18 Jan. 2010

dominated the steppes. One sub-group, the Saka, whose range was probably the most easterly, created distinctive jewellery in classic nomad style but using turquoise inset in gold.



Figure 8 Achaemenid Persian gold winged lion roundel C6th–5th BCE.²⁷

From the sixth century BCE, elements of Achaemenid Persian style (figure 8), itself echoing their pastoral nomadic culture of origin, can be seen, not only in areas such as the Oxus (Amu Darya), which was within the ambit of the Persian Empire, but even as far away as Siberia. The Hermitage Museum collection of Saka/Scythian jewellery from the Ukraine, the Pontic steppes, Kazakhstan, and Siberia, includes both sections of a gold belt buckle from C5th–4th BCE Southwestern Siberia (figure 9). On each a winged and horned lion whose hindquarters become an eagle's head attacks a horse coiled into an 's' and also is decorated with the eyes and beaks of raptors, elegantly combining metamorphosis, animal combat, 'c' curve, and a Persian lion. While ibex, deer, and other horned animals are widespread across Central Eurasia, and occur in the arts of virtually all cultures, lions, in particular the Asiatic lion, had a much more

²⁷ CAIS Images of Ancient Iran Available at: http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/virtual_museum/achaemenid/Artefacts/metalwork.htm Accessed 17 Jan. 2010

restricted range (including coastal Mediterranean, Anatolia, Iran, and across to North India), making it a useful marker for trade-related influences.²⁸



Figure 9 Gold belt plaque, Southwestern Siberia C5th–4th BCE.²⁹

The steppes style could also be found in the jewellery of eastern Indo-Eurasian tribes such as the Xiongnu, Yuezhi, and Xianbe on the borders of China, from as early as the C5th BCE (Figure 7, 10).

²⁸ Heleanor Feltham, 'Here be Lions,' unpublished PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 2002

²⁹ State Hermitage Museum collection. Available at:

http://hermitagemuseum.org/html/En/12/2004/hm12_1_19_00_14.html Accessed 17 Jan. 2010



Figure 10. Xiongnu-style gold belt buckle with paired felines attacking ibexes, C3rd–2nd BCE.³⁰

The style can be seen at its most sophisticated in the gold jewellery, metalwork, and sculptures of the Achaemenid Persians, particularly in the objects found in the Oxus treasury, currently in the British Museum (figure 11).

³⁰ Metropolitan Museum. Available at: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/04/nc/ho_17.190.1672.htm

Accessed 17 Jan. 2010.

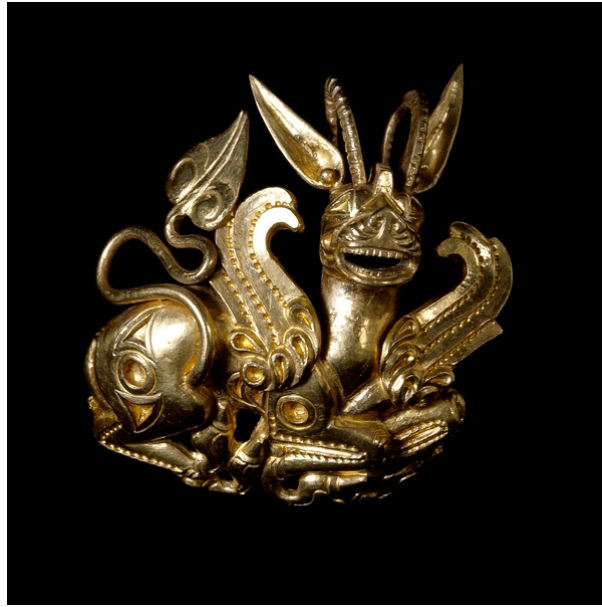


Figure 11. Achaemenid, Oxus Treasury, gold, winged leonine stag, C5th–4th BCE Tadjikistan.³¹

Around the fifth century BCE a change began in the western steppes that slowly spread across the entire nomad oecumene. As early as the C7th BCE Greek settlers began to colonize the shores of the Black Sea, establishing cities and coming in contact with the Scythian nomads of the region.³² They both imported and created jewellery and other objects in the style of their homelands, and established trade relations with their nomad neighbours, buying especially horses and wheat.³³ By the C5th BCE nomad human and horse jewellery increasingly utilized Greek themes and styles; new motifs include realistic images of nomad life, lions instead of

³¹ British Museum Oxus Treasure Highlights. Available at:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/e/ornament_from_oxus_treasure.aspx

Accessed 17 Jan. 2010.

³² David and Ruth Whitehouse, *Archaeological Atlas of the World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975). There is still considerable debate on the dating of the earliest Greek settlements. Sinope, on the shores of ancient Anatolia, settled by merchants from Miletus, may have been the first recorded settlement, but certainly any number of cities were viable by the C6th BCE. Xenophon in the *Anabasis* mentions that the citizens of Trapezus (modern Trabzon) spoke Greek.

³³ Beckwith, *op. cit.*

leopards and snow leopards, images of Heracles and Aphrodite, Heracles knots and Pegasus rhytons. Gold gorytus (bow cases) and scabbards were decorated with complex bands of scenes including Greek male and female figures, griffons, lions hunting, and acanthus and grape motifs (figure 12). At one time it was thought that Greek craftspeople made the spectacular gold weapons, bowls, and jewellery, but today it is generally accepted that the nomads themselves were the originators.³⁴



Figure 12. Detail of a Scythian gold gorytus (bow case) from Chertomlyk, Ukraine, C4th BCE.³⁵

³⁴ Reeder, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Reeder, *op. cit.* For a detailed study of this bow case see the chapter by Michael Treister in this catalogue.

At the same time, Black Sea Scythians, according to Herodotus, claimed descent from the Greek gods, sometimes directly from Zeus, often from the union of Heracles and a local river deity. Images of Heracles became extremely popular (figure 13).



Figure 13. Silver horse jewellery with Heracles and the lion, Scythian, C4th BCE.³⁶

Other pieces were virtually direct copies of Greek jewellery; signet rings, necklaces, 'leech' earrings, and lion-headed armbands (figure 14) are all typical of C4th Scythian grave goods.

However, Michèle Daumas in *L'or et le Pouvoir: Armement Scythe et Mythes Grecs* (Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris ouest, 2009), argues that they were commissioned pieces from Greek goldsmiths.

³⁶ Reeder, op. cit.



Figure 14 Scythian gold lion's head bracelet
Ukraine 350–300 BCE.³⁷



Figure 15 Greek gold serpent and Heracles
knot bracelet 350–300 BCE.³⁸

The new realism slowly travelled across Central Asia as luxury goods were exchanged between tribes, though the further it moved from its point of origin on the Black Sea, the more it combined with traditional nomad styles. Pazyryk stags, for instance, are often relatively realistic rather than metamorphic and contorted (figure 16), though felt appliqués and tattoos echo earlier traditions.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Filippo Coarelli (trans. D. Strong), *Greek and Roman Jewellery* (London: Hamlyn, 1970)

³⁹ N. V. Polosmak and L. L. Barkova, *Costumes and Textiles, Pazyryk Altai* (Novosybyrsk: Enfolio, 2005)



Figure 16. Wood, gold & leather stag. Pazyryk C5th BCE.⁴⁰

The new realism had reached Central Asia at much the same time that a major shift in the cultural balance occurred in the West. In the mid-C4th BCE, Greece became united under Phillip of Macedon and his son, Alexander (356–323 BCE). The previous century’s conflict between the Greeks and the Persian empire was resolved with Alexander’s defeat of the Achaemenid ruler, Darius, and his campaigns to incorporate the most distant satrapies of Persia, including the oasis cities of Central Asia, Bactria (Afghanistan), and Gandhara (Northern India/Pakistan). In these regions he settled soldiers from his armies, encouraging intermarriage, building cities in the Greek style such as Termez and Ai Khanoum, and empowering his generals as local rulers. After his death, Alexander’s empire broke apart, and eventually much of Persia proper fell to the nomadic Parthians, splitting the Greek-ruled kingdom of Bactria from the Romano-Hellenic world. From the third century BCE to the early first CE, Greek kingdoms continued to exist in Central Asia (figure 17), but even after the last kingdom collapsed, Greek style in sculpture, metalwork, and jewellery, and even textiles, continued to be a major aesthetic in the region, reinforcing the existing nomad love of Hellenistic decorative motifs.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hermitage. Available at: <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/fcgi-bin/db2www> Accessed 17 Jan. 2010

⁴¹ John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1994)



Figure 17. Bactria C4th BC silver horse rhyton.⁴²

Meanwhile, in the steppes area bordering China in the C2nd BCE, two tribal groups, also of Indo-European speakers, were in conflict with both the Chinese and each other. (figure 18) The weaker of the two, the Yuezhi, were driven out of their traditional range in 176 BCE and migrated to the steppes region of what is now Uzbekistan (figure 20), eventually settling in Transoxiana in 155 BCE, just north of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom.⁴³ The other, the Xiongnu, continued to raid and trade with Han Dynasty China (202 BCE–221 CE), provoking the Emperor Han Wudi in 126 BCE to try to ally with the Yuezhi against them. While the Yuezhi rejected the alliance, the Chinese thrust into Central Asia that followed would formally establish the Silk Road trade routes between East and West, enriching the city-states of Central Asia and providing new opportunities for trade and employment for the nomads.⁴⁴

⁴² Akira Hori, Nicholas Sekunda, Paul Bernard, et al., *Treasures of Ancient Bactria* (Kyoto: The Miho Museum, 2002).

⁴³ Beckworth, op. cit.

⁴⁴ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Volume 1. Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998)



Figure 18 Xiongnu or Yuezhi gold and turquoise headress C2nd BCE.⁴⁵

The Yuezhi particularly benefited, slowly establishing a loose rule over the Sogdian oasis cities and most probably blending their tribes with local Saka-Scythian nomads whose language and life-style were not dissimilar. (Wu Di's envoy, Zhang Qian, reported that "although the states from Dayuan west to Anxi (Parthia) speak rather different languages, their customs are generally similar and their languages mutually intelligible. The men have deep-set eyes and profuse beards and whiskers. They are skillful at commerce and will haggle over a fraction of a cent. Women are held in great respect, and the men make decisions on the advice of their women."⁴⁶

From their Sogdian and Graeco-Bactrian neighbours they adopted coinage, alphabet, and elements of Greek style, while maintaining aspects of nomad culture (figure 19: the figure of Zeus is shown wearing nomad costume and sword). Gradually the Yuezhi expanded their rule, sacking the Graeco-Bactrian city of Ai Khanoum in 145 BC. By 120 BC they had invaded and incorporated the Bactrian kingdom.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Available at: www.happy-bayar-tours.com/history_ancient.php Accessed 17 Jan. 2010

⁴⁶ Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Han Dynasty II*. Translated from the *Shiji* of Sima Qian, revised ed, Chapter 123: "The Account of Dayuan" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)

⁴⁷ Loeschner, Hans, Notes on the Yuezhi-Kushan Relationship and Kushan Chronology, *Circle of Inner Asian Arts Newsletter* no. 16, 2008



Figure 19. Early Yuezhi coin with bust of a Yuezhi chief imitating those of the Bactrian king Heliocles c. 120 BCE.⁴⁸

By the early C1st CE, one branch of the Yuezhi, the Kushans, had become particularly powerful, dominating the confederacy of Yuezhi tribes and moving further into north India, establishing a new empire, which incorporated both oasis cities and Bactrian and Gandharan kingdoms and dominating commerce on the Silk Road (figure 20).

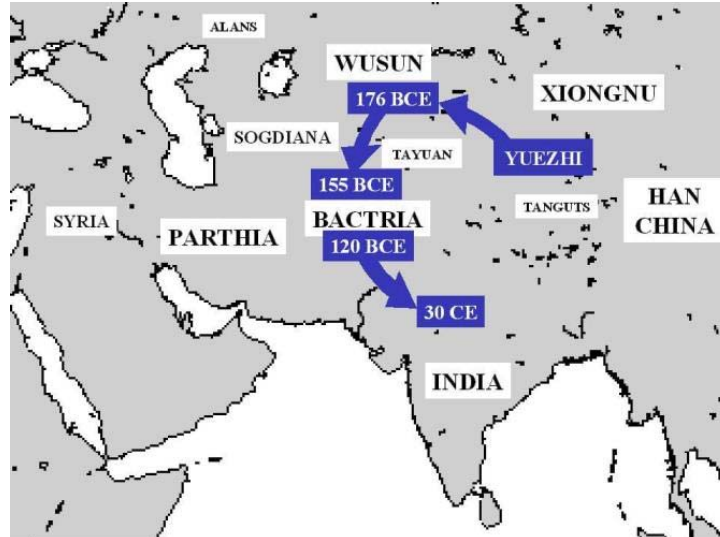


Figure 20. Map of Yuezhi migrations.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Wikipedia, Yuezhi. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuezhi> Accessed 17 Jan. 2010

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Early in their move from tribe to empire, probably in the mid-C1st CE, the Kushans buried a small group of their royal dead in an unusual necropolis. Dating was assisted by the presence of a number of coins of varying origins and date, including a gold coin of the Roman emperor, Tiberius, none later than the early first century CE. The site, now called Tillya Tepe (Hill of Gold) was originally a small, fortified settlement, frequently built over, which had effectively crumbled into a useable burial mound. Discovered by the Russian archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi in 1978, six royal graves were excavated before the Afghan wars closed down the site and the more than 20,000 gold objects found there disappeared from the Kabul museum, believed lost until 2003. Six of the graves were of women, one of a man. The women were buried wearing the *shalwar kameez*, the tunic over trousers still worn in Afghanistan and the Punjab, heavily decorated with gold plaques. The man wore standard nomad dress — heelless boots, baggy trousers and a short, belted kaftan over a shirt — in marked contrast to the Hellenistic warriors shown on the gold clasp in tomb III, but similar to that on Scythian metalwork (figure 2) and later Kushan sculpture (figure 21).



Figure 21. Stone sculpture of a Kushan Warrior, Gandhara C2nd–3rd CE.⁵⁰



Figure 22. Gold and turquoise boot buckle C1st CE, Tillya Tepe Tomb IV.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Kunst und Ausstellungshalle Bonn, *Gandhara, the Buddhist Legacy of Pakistan*, Exhibition Catalogue (Bonn: Verlag Philipp von Zabern. 2009)

His boots were decorated with buckles of gold inset with turquoise. Inside a circle of turquoise leaves a Chinese-style chariot, with a square base and a circular canopy, drawn by a pair of dragons, holds an elegantly robed official (figure 22). His weaponry also reflect Chinese influences, but his belt of braided gold chain with nine large medallions features a figure that could be interpreted as either Dionysus or the Sogdian goddess Nana seated on a panther.⁵² Since his headdress included a very Persian gold ram and a tree of life, his weapons featured animal combat, bears, and dragons along with Greek acanthus leaf motifs, and his clothing was decorated with Indian-style medallions, he is decoratively multicultural, reflecting a history of Indo-Eurasian origins, tribal migration, trade and cultural contacts, conquests and integration.



Figure 23. Gold appliqué Aphrodite. C1st CE. Tillya Tepe Tomb VI.⁵³

⁵¹ Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon, eds., *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2008)

⁵² Hiebert, op. cit.

⁵³ Ibid.

In all the graves the jewellery, accessories, and weapons exhibit an extraordinary range of influences: Siberian bears, Chinese dragons, and Persian rams and lions vie with classical cameos, acanthus leaf designs, and images of Dionysus and Aphrodite. One figure alone, a plump golden Aphrodite (figure 23), curves in a sensuous Greek style, has the wings of a Persian deity, and an Indian bindi between her eyebrows. To me the two most revealing pieces are the pair of pendants showing the 'dragon master' and the double belt buckles of a boy on a dolphin.



Figure 24. Dragon Master gold and gemstone pendant
C1st CE, Tillya Tepe tomb II.⁵⁴



Figure 25. Gilt silver amuletic pendant with
coral and glass, Khiva, late C19th CE.⁵⁵

The 'dragon master' (figure 24) strongly resembles early Greek images of the 'mistress of animals' goddess. In Mycenaean jewellery of the late Bronze Age (1600–1100 BCE) she is often seen standing between two lions or two mythological beasts, and her image persists well into the Hellenistic period.⁵⁶ In the Tillya Tepe pendants, the figure is of a man wearing a crown. He has a Buddha-like face with slanted eyes and a dot on his forehead. His costume is a standard nomad

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Johannes Kalter and Marareta Pavaloï, eds., *Uzbekistan: Heirs to the Silkroad* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997)

⁵⁶ Katie Demakopoulou, ed., *The Aidonia Treasure: Seals and Jewellery of the Aegean Late Bronze Age* (Athens: Ministry of Culture Archaeological Receipts Fund, 1998)

short kaftan over a longer robe and he wears torque, armbands, and belt. His horned and winged dragons curve in an 's' and their hindquarters feature eagle heads and horse hooves in traditional Saka Scythian style. Below the figures, and held by plaited gold chains, are gold discs and tripartite flowers, possibly lotus; the whole is set with turquoise, garnet, lapis, carnelian, and pearl. The form, with highly stylised human and dragon figures, reappears in a remarkably similar piece from late C19th Khiva (figure 25). The use of chains, tripartite floral elements, coins or discs and gold, blue and red elements can also be found in traditional Uzbek and Turkomen jewellery.⁵⁷ Indeed several of the Tillya Tepe pieces have stylistic echoes in later cultures, including the use of large, round knobbly gold or silver beads and elongated pyramidal beads forming a fastening, though human and animal representation has long since fallen foul of Islamic strictures and occurs only in a vestigial or highly stylised form.

However, more strictly Classical motifs, signet rings with images of Greek gods or heroes, tritons with dolphins, and plaques of Dionysos and Ariadne on a lion have no relatively modern counterpart. There are certainly lions in North India, but definitely no dolphins. Perhaps the most thoroughly dependent on Greek concepts, though much modified by Saka-Scythian style are the boy on a dolphin belt buckles found in two of the tombs; one pair features winged cupids, the other rather more human riders. Given the distance from any actual dolphins (the nearest would have been the long-nosed freshwater dolphins of the Ganges and Indus rivers), their forms are remarkably true to Mediterranean type, though transmuted through a nomad vision into somewhat squat and scaly giant fish.

⁵⁷ Ibid.



Figure 26. Gold and turquoise 'boy on a dolphin' belt buckle, Tillya Tepe C1st CE.⁵⁸

The six Tillya Tepe tombs reveal a world of power and prestige where jewellery, portable wealth, was used lavishly as an indicator of status. They also reflect a complex history of nomad migration and contacts; a world in which exchange of goods, strengthened by Greek incursions into Central Asia, brought Greek mythology, symbolism, and even its lions and dolphins into a wider cultural context, creating new decorative art forms. At the 'high art' end, the Kushan Empire would develop the seminal Buddhist sculptural style of Gandhara, and bedeck the bodhisattvas with arm bands, torques, necklaces, and crowns, and the forms that Buddhism took would continue to influence the sculpture of China and Japan.

⁵⁸ Ibid.



Figure 27. Large Mongolian silver lioness with cubs and pendant inverted horses and carved agate beads. Late 19th – early 20th century.⁵⁹

But jewellery reflecting the Saka-Scythian forms of Tillya Tepe and other early nomad cultures would also continue; the lions, contorted horses, fish and deer, for instance, can be found as themes in Mongolian and minority Chinese jewellery and amulets well into the twentieth century (figure 27). In Central Asia up to the twentieth century, among both nomad and oasis cultures, men, women and horse alike were splendidly decorated; with headdresses, necklaces, gold and silver-set straps and sword belts, elaborately decorative weapons, earrings, and rings whose forms, in many cases, echo the traditional jewellery of the early nomad cultures of the steppes.

Greek style, nomad lifestyle, *mutatis mutandi*, still continues to enchant and inspire, and among today’s high fashion jewellers, the traditional gem-set lion-headed torque can be found in the work of contemporary artists such as the Greek goldsmith Ilias Lalaounis.

⁵⁹ Author’s personal collection



Figure 28. Ilias Lalaounis, gold lion's head torque, Greece, late C20th.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Author's personal collection

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