



Cimmerians

Summary :

The Cimmerians were the predecessors of the Scythians. Their art incorporated Greek Geometric as well as Caucasian elements. The Scythians replaced the Cimmerians in the Pontic area. However, the roots of the Cimmerian culture can be traced as far as Siberia and Northern China. A historical overview of the Cimmerians and their culture is provided by the written testimony which consists of both Near Eastern and Greek sources. Archaeological excavations brought to light vast cemeteries and various objects which allowed a distinction of Cimmerian culture in two phases. The second one was progressively replaced by Scythian Orientalizing art.

Date

10th - 7th c. BC

Geographical Location

North Pontic area

1. Scythian art: the formative period

This earliest stage of the North Pontic art known as Cimmerian, only shared a few general characteristics with Greek Geometric art, but it should be born in mind that some contacts with the Caucasus area predated the 7th c. B.C. The earliest [Scythians](#) used the Geometric style like their predecessors, the Cimmerians. Among the Geometric styles most sophisticated was Greek Geometric art, which in turn was influenced by pottery from the Black Sea and Caucasian areas. This period of the first Greek penetration in the area is reflected on the myth of the Golden Fleece and the story of Iphigenia as priestess in the Crimea. The distribution of the Ionian "insular" type of Greek fibulae in the Caucasus area and the Caucasian imports, known notably from the Heraion of [Samos](#), show that some visits occurred as early as at least the 8th c. and may already had some impact on the first formative period of Scythian art, related to the late Cimmerian period. The formative period of the Scythian art was not stylistically homogenous. Attempts to correlate change of artistic style with ethnicity are dubious, especially at a time when one stylistic phase replaces another, and the new one is not yet fully developed. The Cimmerians and Scythians are not always distinguishable archaeologically. The Scythians replaced the Cimmerians in the Pontic area, but the Novočerkassk stage was shared by both of them, and the ethnic similarity and identical way of living enabled the absorption of the latter by the Scythians.

2. The written testimony on the Cimmerians

There are two main groups of literary sources about the Cimmerians: Near Eastern and Greek. The former are mainly contemporary documents on wars in the Assyrian border zone; the latter mostly comprise stories transferred from old traditions or memories. Both are mainly concerned with those aspects of Cimmerian history, which directly affected the civilized world, i.e. there are viewed from a different angle than the present position. According to [Homer](#),¹ the Cimmerians were people living in a mythical land of fog and darkness, on the fringes of the inhabited world.²

3. The roots of Cimmerian culture

Cimmerian culture, as defined by Terenožkin,³ had several roots: local, derived from the previous Belozërka culture; Caucasian (Koban culture); the third marked the Siberian links, with relations further east, as far east as Northern China; at least the earlier Ordos bronzes also date from the 9th-8th c. B.C. The stelae, called stag stones, and the daggers indicate mainly the eastern links up to Tuva, likewise several parts of horse-trappings. The Cimmerians and their contemporaries were among the first who developed real cavalry. Most of the other bronze objects, including mace-heads with figural motifs (mainly horse heads), link the Cimmerians with the Caucasian Koban culture, while pottery follows the style of the Belozërka phase. The earlier stage of Cimmerian culture, called Čenrogorovka, represents the 'classical' style, while the later Novočerkassk phase marks the beginning of the transition to Scythian Orientalizing art. They mostly date from 10th to 8th c. B.C. Graves belonging to both stages of the Cimmerian culture are distributed over vast territories from the Kuban and Volga/Kama area over the Crimea, Ukraine and Moldova to NE Bulgaria



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(Belogrades, Endža). The most characteristic objects are daggers of the Kabardino-Pjatigorsk type, horse-bits of the so-called North Caucasian types, certain arrowheads and less characteristic spearheads. Rattles in openwork were probably ritual objects connected with some kind of shamanism. The Maltese crosses seem to have possessed some symbolic significance, perhaps connected to the sun or representing the four-sided world, as some Scythian parallels can be found on Assyrian reliefs.

4. The impact of Cimmerian art on other cultures

The related Thraco-Cimmerian bronzes are known from the eastern part of Central Europe. Besides the horse trappings, mace-heads and rattles, this group also includes tripartite pendants terminating in bird heads and belt finishings in openwork. The centre of this Mezöcsád culture which combined Cimmerian and Thracian elements was apparently in Hungary. Cimmerian culture also influenced the Thracian Geometric bronzes in central Bulgaria, of which several items found their way to Early Greek sanctuaries, and a similar impact was also conveyed to the so-called Macedonian bronzes produced mainly along the Axios river, some of which are also known as dedications in early Greek sanctuaries.

5. Historical overview

The first Assyrian references on the Cimmerians date from 722-713 BC. During the reign of Sancherib (705-681 BC) the Cimmerians attacked Asia Minor and destroyed the Phrygian empire: the Phrygian king [Midas](#) committed suicide.⁴ This presumably happened in 696/695 B.C. (Eusebius' chronology), although a date twenty years later cannot be excluded. The American excavations at [Gordion](#) uncovered considerable destruction layers, but no characteristic "Cimmerian" objects. A group of Cimmerians probably settled for some time near [Sinope](#), and King Asarhaddon mentions an Assyrian victory over them in 679 BC. The military leader of the Cimmerians in their 679/678 campaign is called Tušpa in Assyrian records. Another group of Cimmerians probably entered Anatolia from Thrace. This was suggested by [Strabo](#), in his reference to an alliance between the Cimmerians and the Thracian Treres and Edoni⁵ tribes later occupying Central Bulgaria (Treres) and Chalcidice (Edoni). The Lydian king [Gyges](#) even sought aid against them from Assurbanipal. A second attack on [Lydia](#) in 652 B.C. was successful. [Sardis](#) (with the exception of the citadel) was sacked and Gyges killed.

The leader of the Cimmerian troops in 652 B.C. is named Lygdamis in Greek sources, and there is a parallel name Tugdamme in the Assyrian records. According to Strabo, Lygdamis was later killed in [Cilicia](#), and Assyrian archives probably confirm this report. This happened between 637 and 625 B.C. The first attempts of [Greek colonisation](#) in the SE part of the Black Sea were stopped due to the Cimmerian attacks in the territory, and the second foundation of Sinope in c. 630 B.C. may probably be a result of the defeat of the Cimmerians. [Herodotus](#), however, mentions that the last Cimmerians were only driven out of Asia Minor by Alyattes, in about 600 B.C.⁶

The reason why most of the Cimmerians left their country in the Pontic steppe was the movement of the Scythians from the east under pressure from the Massagetes. This happened before 713 B.C., when both Cimmerians and following them Scythians reached the region of Urartu.⁷ Herodotus explicitly mentions [Tyras](#) (Dniestre) as the place where the Cimmerian kings fought a fratricidal battle and were buried, and from where the common people left their homes. After this, Herodotus describes the Cimmerian escape along the Black Sea west of the Caucasus to the area of Sinope,⁸ and this may be the story of one of their main military forces. Some Cimmerians, however, remained on the shores of Maeotis (the Azov Sea), as reported by Plutarchus,⁹ apparently following an earlier tradition. The Cimmerian Bosphorus, Cimmerian Walls and the Cimmerian peninsula are all in the same area (the Crimea and its surroundings), much more further east than Tyras/Dniestre, and equally distant from Araxes, the original eastern boundary of the Cimmerians. Araxes usually designated Syr-Darja. The fratricidal battle of the Cimmerian leaders on the Dniestre seem to have marked the last stage of the retreat of the Cimmerians, which was not a single event, but lasted for a considerable time, just as happened later in Sarmato-Scythian relations. The fact that most of the Cimmerians must have disappeared early is underlined by Aristeas' Arimaspeia (7th century at the latest, perhaps earlier), which only knows them as earlier inhabitants of the Pontic steppes.

6. The archaeological evidence



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Especially interesting are several nomadic finds from NE Anatolia, which may be either Cimmerian or Scythian (see below) especially those from Irmlar near Amasia and Nurşintepe. Similar objects came from Kaplangu, Hasanlu, Çavuş-tepe and from the Ziywé region. Since their dating to the second half of the 7th century B.C. appears plausible, archaeological finds seem to contribute to the picture of the Scythian Near Eastern campaigns, known from historical sources. The group of horse-bits from these complexes¹⁰ has parallels among the finds from Amlash in Iran, and may be more closely connected with the Iranian than with the Eurasian world, but the bird' s or [griffin](#)' s heads and other ornaments collected by Hauptmann seem to point more closely to the tradition of the Eurasian steppes.¹¹ The gold [rosettes](#) from Altintepe¹² can be compared with the late stage of what are commonly supposed to be Cimmerian objects, like the Belogradec grave in Bulgaria. In fact, the objects find the best parallels among the finds from the earliest [Kelermes](#) barrows.¹³ It should be remembered that also the cross-like objects characteristic for the Cimmerians are represented at Kelermes.¹⁴ The 'Cimmerian' arrowheads are known from a number of Anatolian sites. V. Ūnal mentions 250 socketed arrowheads from the area between Tasova and Ladik, north of Amasya, dating from the 7th-6th century, which may have been either Cimmerian or Scythian.¹⁵

7. Current research

There is a long discussion among Russian and Ukrainian archaeologists as to whether the late Cimmerian phase named after the Novočerkasskij hoard is still Cimmerian or already Scythian.¹⁶ There was also a long discussion on the chronology among Russian archaeologists, started by Medvedskaja in 1992 and followed in the next two years.¹⁷ If the Novočerkasskij horizon would be allowed partly still after 700, and the beginning of the earliest "Archaic" Scythian art in the second- third quarter of the 7th century, as suggested already by Galanina, the chronological gap would disappear.¹⁸

Some attempts have been made to alter the usual picture elaborated mainly by Terenožkin,¹⁹ and to confine the Cimmerians only to the very late stage of c. 700 B.C.²⁰ or to make them only an unimportant tribe on the northern frontiers of the Assyrian empire, but the earlier common opinion should be preferred.²¹

8. Conclusions

We should remember that the two tribal groups spoke a related Iranian language (though we know only a few words of the former), their nomadic way of life was similar, and, according to Near Eastern sources, so was their way of warfare. From an art history point of view Scythian art is a similar continuation of the Pontic and North Caucasian artistic tradition under new "Orientalistic" impulses, as was the transition between Geometric and Archaic art in Greece and Etruria. Scythians did not come with an established sophisticated artistic tradition, their first products are simple, and it was only after contact with more sophisticated artistic traditions during their invasions in the Near East that Scythian art attained a high level.²²

It should be understood that the formative period of the Scythian art was not homogenous in its style. Attempts to correlate a change in the artistic style with ethnicity are dubious, especially at the time when one stylistic phase replaces another, and the new one is not yet fully developed. Cimmerians and Scythians are not always distinguishable archaeologically at that "transitional" period. Neither in Greece nor in Etruria, there was a strong frontier between the Geometric and Orientalizing styles, and the transition from one style to another there had nothing to do with any ethnic change. Scythians replaced Cimmerians in the Pontic area, but the Novočerkassk stage is attributed to both of them, and the ethnic similarity and identical way of life enabled the swallowing of the remains of the latter by the Scythians.

1. *Od.* I.14.

2. Strab. I. 2.9



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3. A.J. Terenožkin, *Kimmerijcy* (Kiev 1976).
4. Hdt. I.6, 15.
5. Strab. I.1.10, I.3.21, VII figs. 11 and 36, XII.3.34, XII.8.7, XIII.4.8.
6. Hdt. I.16.
7. Hdt. IV.11-13 and VII.20.
8. Hdt. IV.12.
9. Plut. *Marius*, XI
10. The finds include Arsintepe, no. 141 in the Vienna exhibition of Anatolian art in 1990.
11. Bouzek, J. "Les Cimmériens en Anatolie", in: *Mode de contacts et processus de transformation dans les sociétés anciennes*, Actes du colloque de Cortone 1981, (Pisa-Rome 1983), p. 220-235 and Bouzek, J. "Caucasus and Europe and the Cimmerian problem" *Sborník NM Prague A 37*, fasc. 4. (Prague,1983).
12. no. 144 in the same exhibition
13. Galanina, L.K. *Kelermeskije kurgany - Die Kurgane von Kelermes* (Moskva 1997), pl. 16, cat. nos. 169, 173, 179, 195, 189 etc
14. Galanina, L.K. *Kelermeskije kurgany - Die Kurgane von Kelermes*, (Moskva 1997), pl. 23, cat. nos. 294-297, harness of the horses 15 and 16 of Veselovskij Kurgan 2
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16. Лесков А., *Заключительный этап бронзового века на юге Украины*, (Москва 1975) cf. also later, the discussion in *ВДИ - Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* (1992-1994).
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Glossary :

	rosette, the
An ornament with a generally circular combination of parts resembling a flower or plant.	

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