



Scythian Tribes

Summary :

There is not much evidence concerning Scythian tribes. Some archaeological finds are related to their settlements and artworking. The written testimony, however, provides researchers with information connected to their origins, customs, neighbours and the locations where Scythian tribes actually settled.

Date

Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic periods, Late Antiquity

Geographical Location

Ukraine, Moldova

1. The written testimony

We are much less informed about the Scythian tribes than about those of the [Thracians](#)¹ and Celts. The best and only exhaustive source is the fourth book of [Herodotus](#),² and all interpretations are mainly based on what he writes.

Herodotus visited Borysthene (Olbia) and his description of Scythia is based on what he heard there from his informants. For him, Scythians were all the people who inhabited Scythia and who led a similar (mainly nomadic) way of life. He however mentions several occasions that neither all of them spoke the same language, nor led a nomadic way of life, but inhabited this same exotic part of the world. Their proto-cities in the forest-steppe zone, like the Belskoe gorodišče, can be compared with proto-cities in other parts of the world, like Labrutes, the small fortified town near to Sedmibratskie kurgany (the Barrows of Seven Brothers). In a later period, Scythian Neapolis in the centre of the Crimea became the capital of the Scythian kingdom.

2. The origin of the Scythians

There are two legends on the origin of the Scythians. One of them is reported by Herodotus.³ The first Scythian man, Targitaios, was son of Zeus and the daughter of the river Borysthene. He had three sons, Lipoxais, Arpoxais and Kolaxias. During their reign gold implements fell from the sky: a plough, a yoke, an axe and a bowl. The two elder brothers could not touch them as they were burning, only the youngest Kolaxias, to whom they became cooler, could grasp them; so he took the royal dignity. Strangely enough, these objects consisted of agricultural equipment, not intended for stock-breeding nomads. Of the Thracian tribes the Auchates are descendants of Lipoxaios, the Katiarai and Traspiai of Arpoxaios, while the royal Scythians - Paratatoi - are descendants of the youngest brother's line, Kolaxias. The Greek legend mentions⁴ three sons of Heracles and the Snake Goddess (she kept the hero with her before returning the herd of Geryon, and gave them back to the hero only after she got from him children). Of the three sons only the youngest could use the father's bow left to them; he became the ruler and the ancestor of Royal Scythians. The legend is also depicted on the [Kul-Oba](#) globular vessel and both versions celebrate the leading position of the Royal Scythians among all Scythians and their neighbours. The Scythians came from the east under the pressure of Massagetoï and took the Pontic land from the [Cimmerians](#).

3. The Scythian tribes' settlements

Since excavations started, there has been much effort to achieve an exact correlation of Herodotus' description of Scythian tribes – and their neighbours – with the archaeological evidence.⁵ The area around the arc of Don yielded most of the [Scythian royal tombs](#); so it is considered to be the Gerros land of the Royal Scythians.⁶ The Scythians - Farmers and Scythians - Ploughmen were situated in the periphery of the [chora](#) of [Olbia](#) on the Dniester, in present-day western Ukraine and Moldova. The Alazonoi and Kallipidoi were situated usually to the west of the two former tribes along the upper Dneister up to Prut; their art was not that different from the art of their neighbours the Getoi. Getoi lived along the north-western corner of the Black Sea, in north-eastern Bulgaria and eastern



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Romania; their language was a Thracian dialect.⁷ Agathyrsi were usually located in Multenia and Transylvania; their culture had many links with that of the Scythians,⁸ although they were described by Herodotus as charioteers, a characteristic which would situate them – in the archaeological pattern - further westwards.

Agathyrsi lived west of Scythia near the river Maris (Mureş). At the coast of Tyras (Dnieper) lived the Tyriatai, citizens or allies of the Greek town of [Tyras](#), while north of them were the Neuroi, situated mainly between the Bukovina and Pripeť in Belorussia (the Milograd culture); sometimes they are considered as predecessors of the Slavs. East of them lived "proper" Scythians. Four days upstream of Hypanis (Bug) there is a bitter source tributary, lying at the frontier between the Scythian Ploughmen and the Alazons. In the area of the Alazons, the rivers Tyras and Hypanis come near to each other. The Melanchlainoi, another tribe related to the Scythians, lived according to Herodotus north of the Royal Scythians and twenty days trip from the sea, in the forest-steppe in the Ukraine and South Russia.⁹ Their centre was probably at the river Sejm (in the area of Kursk, archaeologically identified as the Juchnov culture). They had fortified settlements by the rivers and were farmers. The Budinoi are probably best to be placed in the area of Upper Don. Fortified proto-cities such as Kamesnkoe, Belskoe, Paterskoe and Matroninskoe gorodišče (forts) show that a series of nearly urban settlements existed in the forest-steppe zone, north of the steppe territory of the nomads.

4. The Scythian tribes' neighbours

East of the Scythians, Herodotus mentions several other people. Behind the Tanais (Don) river he placed the Budinoi, in whose territory – if localized correctly - the Častyje kurgany and a number of important settlements seem to have been established. Herodotus also provides us with interesting information on the behaviour of the Scythians' neighbours. In the case of the Sauromats, who lived east of the Scythians and of the Budinoi, women wore the same dress as men and also went to war with them. The girls could marry only after having brought home the head of an enemy, which was not such an easy task; some, as Herodotus mentions, became old without being married. Among the Massagetes and Agythyrsi further east, women were common property of the whole community to avoid struggle. The Masagetes also killed old people and ate their boiled meat. Such death was especially honoured, while those who died because of infections and other diseases were buried and their fate was considered unhappy. The Massagetes and Agathyrsi decorated their dresses with gold ornaments (as it is now confirmed by finds from their territory), while the Tauroi in the Crimea mountains had the custom of putting the heads of their enemies on high poles in their villages.

In the case of the Androphagoi, the wildest of the northern neighbours of the Scythians, cannibalism was common. The Yirkoi and Thyssagetoï lived in the taiga north of the Budinoi; their country was separated from that of the Budinoi by a desert, which could be crossed in seven days. According to Herodotus, more Scythians lived further east. These people were bold, had small noses and big chins. Their country was mountainous, their language different, but their dress and habits were like those of the Scythians.¹⁰ Herodotus gives us their name: Argippaioi. East of them lived the Issedonoï, who also consumed their parents, but were otherwise considered being honest people.¹¹ Behind the Issedonoï lived the [Arimaspoi](#), with only one eye. In the same area leaved also the huge birds (in pictorial representations depicted like griffins), who were guardians of gold treasures. Arimaspoi often fought with the griffins for gold and such duels are common decoration on the Kerch vases, Attic products of the 4th century B.C.

The Yirkoi and the Thyssagetoï are usually located in the Upper Volga and its confluents, still west of the Ural Mountains,¹² though the latter are sometimes connected with the Tagar culture on the Jenisseï.¹³ The Maeotians were the neighbours of the Asian part of the Bosporan kingdom, living in what is now the only Black Sea shore left to Russia, north of the Caucasus.¹⁴

5. More Scythian tribes

East of the Maeotians there were more Scythian tribes, whose leaders were buried in the [Kelermes](#) and Kostromskaja barrows.¹⁵ The Sauromatians were located between the Maeotians and the Caspian Sea, the Masagetoï between the Caspian and the Aral Sea, and the Sakoi east of them.¹⁶ The Argippaioi may have lived somewhere in Mongolia and the Bajkal area; the culture of this area is known from the Altai graves in areas like Pazyryk and Aržan.¹⁷ This area had been considered as the central land of the Scythians before they penetrated westwards and chased the Cimmerians off the Pontic steppes; most of their tombs known until now are,



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however, contemporary with the "Gold Age" of the Scythians in the North Pontic area. Their country was crossed by the northern branch of the Silk Road, while the southern branch went across the present-day Kazakhstan to the Sinkiang province of China. The Sakoi or related to them tribes expressed their artistic creativity in a way similar to that of their more northern neighbours. The Arimaspoi were a legendary people, but we know more about the Hyperboreans who lived in the north-eastern part of the Baltic Sea. The amber from their country reached even [Delos](#), and in earlier times, they used to send from their solar sanctuary delegations of maidens, whose memory was worshipped on the Greek island.¹⁸ Their sanctuaries of stones forming labyrinths are known especially from the Ladoga Sea, and in Greek legends Apollo himself visited them every year during winter, after giving over his rule over the Delphic sanctuary to Dionysus, the other leader of the individual human mind in ancient Greece towards its freedom and excellence.

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Glossary :

	chora, the
	The agricultural land (including villages and land-plots) belonging to a polis. It was bounded with the polis on an administrative and economic basis.

Sources

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