

THE CRIMEA: SCYTHIAN/GREEK DUALISM

[BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

[STONE FOUNDATION HOME PAGE](#)

THE SCLOTAI were an Indo-European people made up of marauding tribes of horse-mounted archers whose range extended, over time, from Mongolia in the east to the Baltic and North Sea coasts in the west, an area as vast as North America. Scythian or Scythae is a Greek word for certain of these tribes, those that came to inhabit a particular region north of the Black Sea: the steppe between the Carpathian Mountains and the River Don - and the Crimean Peninsula.

Among the first people to domesticate the horse, their livelihood initially depended on pasturing and hunting, but this was altered when, in the 7th century BC, they came to inhabit the regions described above. These were originally settled by a people known as the Cimmerii, from which the name Crimea derives. The Cimmerii were displaced, assimilated, or both, by the Scythian influx. The area on both sides of the strait between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea was being colonized from Greece at about the same time and the Scythian imagination was intrigued by Hellenic culture.

The Greek historian, Herodotus, identified three Scythian clans, the Ploughman, or agrarian Scythians, the Nomad Scythians and the Royal Scythians. The latter concentrated around present-day Kerch in the eastern tip of the Crimean Peninsula, an area they shared with Greek colonists whose civilized lifestyle, mythology, and art they respected and came to adopt. Herodotus focused considerable attention on the Scythians and from him we have learned that they were a people both savage and sensitive. They drank fermented mare's milk or, like their Greek neighbors, wine from vessels made from the skulls of slain enemies. They had a passion for gold and Scythian artisans crafted objects with it that still have the power to astound us. They valued the hemp plant, made fabrics as fine as linen from it and appreciated its



psychotropic qualities. They were not only fierce in war, but also clever; their strategy of not engaging the mighty invading army of Darius, the king of Persia, in pitched battle, but to harass and lead it deeper into inhospitable territory might have served as an example to the Russians when invaded by Napoleon and Hitler (though Darius escaped with his force intact).

The region is dotted with tumuli containing Scythian and Greek tombs. These are remarkably similar in style and, rather than expressing ethnic distinctions between the cultures, constitute a style of mortuary architecture common to both and distinctive of the region. They relate to similar burial mounds in Greece and Asia Minor and, some infer, reflect the influence of the pyramids of Dynastic Egypt.

This tomb is officially known as the Royal Mound, although, for some reason, the local people refer to it as *вѣджайнѣ* or the vagina. The quality of the masonry work is exceptionally fine. The *dromos* or entry passage shown here is 30 feet high and 72 feet deep. The carefully hewn sandstone blocks were laid without mortar to create a tall, narrow, corbelled vault leading



to the burial chamber. To the Scythians the arrowhead was a revered form and, one might conjecture, could have had an influence on the design. This construction was then covered with a layered barrow; a rubble stone vaulting was laid over the cut stone and was covered with several alternating layers of clay and seaweed, more rubble stone and, finally, earth, creating a tumulus nearly 60 feet in height.

It is dated to the 4th Century BC and was evidently the final resting place of a Bosporan king, possibly Levkon the First, under whose reign the realm reached its apex of power, wealth, and influence.

T.L.

Sources:

Herodotus, "The Histories"

Ellis Hovell Minns, "Scythia" Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition

Friederike Fless, "The Necropolis of Pantikapaion (Kerch, Crimea)"

Krzysztof Ciuk, "Gold of the Nomads"

W. Edmund Filmer, "Our Scythian Ancestors"

Dr. Viktor Zinko, "A Walk Through Ancient Kerch"



PANTICAPAEUM was an ancient Greek colony founded in the early 6th century BC at the site of present-day Kerch, in the Crimea. Strategically located on the western shore of Kerch Strait, the city grew quickly; before the end of the century it was minting its own coins. As the leading trade, manufacturing, and cultural center on the northern coast of the Black Sea, it became the capital of the Bosphoran Kingdom, which arose in the 5th century. It was heavily damaged in Saumacus' revolt and Diophantus' capture of the city at the

end of the 2nd century BC and by an earthquake ca 70 BC. Panticapaeum was rebuilt under Roman rule, and by the 1st century AD had regained its commercial importance. It began to decline in the 3rd century as tribal raids disrupted the trade in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Basin. Panticapaeum was destroyed by the Huns ca 370. Later a small town arose at the site, which in the Middle Ages became known as Bosphorus.

The city was dominated by Mount Mithridates, on which the temples and civic

buildings were placed. The slopes were terraced and covered with private villas. The large bay provided an excellent port. At its apogee the city occupied approximately 100 hectares. Beyond the city walls was a large necropolis, which has been excavated since the end of the 19th century. It included a number of famous kurgans (burial mounds), such as Melek-Chesmen kurgan, Tsarskyi kurgan, Zolota Mohyla, and Yuz Oba. The city itself has been excavated systematically since the Second World War.

Source: Encyclopedia of Ukraine



photos: Julie Kandyba