



## Scythian tumuli

### Summary :

Herodotus in the fourth book of his *Histories* describes several funerary customs and feasts of the Scythians. Archaeological excavations have also brought to light evidence related to the burials of these tribes. So far there have been investigated not only royal tombs but also graves of the lower classes, which provide researchers with information regarding customs, jewellery tradition, clothing, not to mention the relation between Scythians and Greeks.

### Geographical Location

NW Caucasus, Ukraine, Roumania, Hungary, Central Asia, Siberia

### Historical Region

Scythia, Black Sea

## 1. Scythian burial customs

According to [Herodotus](#), gold was the monopoly of rulers, and the rich and large in size Scythian tumuli surpass what is known in many other parts of the world, although Lydian, Thracian and Phrygian tumuli are also large in size and extremely rich.

Herodotus<sup>1</sup> describes in detail the funeral rituals followed to honour the Scythian rulers. The intestines of the ruler's body were removed, the interior was filled with aromatic spices and the corpse was embalmed. The body was then transported by wagon to all the tribes which were under the dead ruler's supremacy, and a funeral feast was organized in all these places. The leaders related to the deceased and other high-ranking individuals cut their hair as a sign of their grief; sometimes they even cut their ears and fingers too. They also inflicted wounds to their arms, nose and stern or they drilled a hole in their left palm with an arrow. Then the leaders and the deceased ruler's guard followed the cortege to the Gerros land. There the [Scythians](#) excavated a deep pit and laid the body in it on a mat. On both sides of the body they inserted spears into the earth and, over them they placed a kind of baldachin of reed. In the same grave they put one of the king's concubines, who received special honours before being sacrificed. The same fate was destined for the king's waiter, cook, groom and messenger. The human victims were accompanied in the grave by various pieces of cattle and also gold vessels. One year later the Scythians would kill 50 men from the deceased person's cavalry along with their horses, embalm their bodies similarly to that of the king and affix them to high poles mounted on their horses surrounding the grave. While Herodotus' description can roughly be compared with the archaeological picture of the richest graves, this last element only finds parallels in the horse burials around some graves, like at Kostromskaja. New excavations have shown that around most of the royal graves a ditch was excavated, both to mark the tumulus in a more apparent way and to use the earth for the construction of the tumulus itself.

Concerning people of lower class, Herodotus mentions<sup>2</sup> that the family organized a forty-day trip for the corpse before the burial. Funerary feasts were also conducted at all the places visited by the relatives. Most of the Scythian tombs were looted, often soon after the burial.

## 2. The archaeological evidence

### 2.1. 7th century BC

The first phase of "royal" Scythian burials dates to the mid and second half of the 7th century and is best represented from the Kuban area (NW of the Caucasus), most notably from [Kelermes](#). The first four tumuli were excavated in 1903-4 by the treasure hunter Schultz, and no details are available. N.I. Veselovskij excavated two of them in 1904; they were partly robbed and were surrounded by horse burials. Around the first 24 horses were buried; around the second, 16. The most important finds are parts of horse harnesses and pole-tops. Among the finds from Ukraine, the so-called Melgunov treasure is the most important. It was excavated in



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1763 in the kurgan Litoj near Kirovgrad and was reported by the general Melgunov to Catherine II.

Slightly later are the kurgans from Ulj (Uljskij aul). The most interesting kurgan of the group was 15 m high. Inside there was a wooden chamber with posts in the corners and on the sides. Around the chamber were the bones of eight oxen and around the tomb, altogether, 360 horses. In the Kostromsjaka Stanica a royal burial was placed within an earlier tumulus. The burial was enclosed by a quadratic wooden chamber, around which were 22 skeletons of horses, partly with horse-bits. The wooden chamber was burnt before being covered with earth. In the chamber only less precious objects were left by the robbers. A gold stag – a sema of a shield – is especially important, as representing the most characteristic example of the Early Scythian Animal Style.

### 2.2. 5th century BC

The fifth century is represented by a number of tumuli in the Ukraine and Crimea. Ostraja Mogila near Tomachovka in the Dniropetrovsk area was five meters high and contained five skeletons. The most interesting finds were some enamelled torques and the hilt of a sword. From Anovka comes a mirror decorated with a nude girl and from Martoroša a **krater** in a fragmentary condition which is similar to vessels from Trebenište. The kurgans of Baby and Raskopana mogila were excavated by D.I. Evarnicki in 1897 near the village of Michailovo-Apostolovo. The chambers were five to five-and-a-half meters under the surface. Among the most important finds were some gold plates from a horse harness. The kurgans at Ak-Mečet and the Gold Kurgan near Simferopol characterize this period in the Crimea steppe; of the former the most important finds were plates with a bird's head and stags, while of the latter plates, probably from a belt, with eagles and **griffins**, and the sheet of a sword decorated with gold **cloisonné technique**.

While the Dnieper group opted for a pit with a **niche** (the so-called catacomb-type), in the Crimea a simple shaft remained popular. In general, we know of less real "royal" tombs dating from the late 6th to the late 5th century BC than from earlier and later periods.

In the Žurovka tumuli on the Dnieper the chambers were supported in the corners and also in the middle of the walls by thick oak posts. They supported smaller planks reinforcing the walls of the pit. The entrance was formed by steps or by a sloping shaft. The bottom of the pit was also lined with wooden planks; the walls were sometimes lined with textile. In several graves both a man and a woman were buried, either wife or concubine. From earlier illegal excavations several fine objects were unearthed featuring an impressive Animal Style, as in tombs 400 and 401 of the second quarter of the 5th century BC. They practically do not bear any traces of Greek influence, while the 5th century BC tombs at **Nymphaeum**, represent characteristics typical of Greek art, even if horse burials around some of the tumuli show that the majority of the dead were not Greeks.

The Sedmibatskije kurgany (tumuli of the **Seven Brothers**) on the lower stream of the Kuban river were partly looted (nos. 1, 5 and 7), although the second one (18m high) yielded the best finds. The largest part of the chamber was covered by the skeletons of 13 horses; the human body was laid in the corner on a bier, wearing a scale corselet with a silver plate representing a hind with calf. The chambers were built of mud bricks. In tomb 4 (14 m high) three **rhyta** were found by the head of the deceased, two of gold with heads of a dog and a ram and one of silver with finial of a buck, much resembling Persian rhyta in style. These graves date from the mid to the second half of the 5th century, and these rulers probably had under their supremacy the small Greek town in the vicinity, known as Labrutes. The Jelizavestkaja Stanica barrows on the middle Kuban river also had many horse burials, some of them on the ancient surface around the grave, similar to the great kurgan of the Uljskij aul. Human bones, partly with arm rings and beads, were found dissociated in various places. In a tomb from Veselovskij, five female skeletons were found lying on their backs, facing east, accompanied by **jewellery**. West of this chamber the partly destroyed skeleton of a man in a composite corselet was found. In 1914 a grave with a funeral wagon was excavated, with three pairs of horses and remains of a second wagon. In other places there were five human skeletons and more horses. The wheels were 75 cm in diameter and had 12 spokes. The grave also yielded a Panathenaic **amphora** of the mid 5th century B.C., roughly contemporaneous with the Panathenaic amphorae from the Adygei barrows.

### 2.3. 4th century BC

One of the most famous barrows dating to the 4th century BC, that from Solocha on Dnieper, 21 km south of Nikopol, should be mentioned first. It was 18 m high and included two burials. The central grave was a shallow quadratic shaft with two lateral chambers.



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In one of the chambers a horse was buried with the cheek-pieces of its bridle and a forehead ornament of gold. The second burial placed at the periphery of the tumulus was not robbed; it had three niches. This grave preserved the famous comb with a representation of a battle between riders and infants, a sheath of a sword with fighting animals, one globular vessel with a hunting scene and another with two sphinxes; inside a small niche there was a **phiale** depicting animals and a **gorytus** depicting fighting Scythians. The tomb is dated to the first quarter of the 4th century BC.

The **Čertomlyk** tumulus was also not robbed. The site lies NW of Nikopol. It was 19 m high, and the perimeter of the tumulus was fastened by undressed stones. More than 250 bridles were found in the upper part of the tumulus. The shaft had four lateral extensions, one with two skeletons with torques with figures of lions and a second with finials in the shape of lions; many other ornaments decorated their dress. In the second there was uncovered a woman with a gold band on her forehead and other decorative objects of gold; supposedly she was an important priestess. A young man was buried in the same niche, and there was also the famous amphora made of gilded silver with floral ornaments on the body and scenes inspired of Scythian life on its shoulder.

Cimbalka, Dejev Kurgan and Geremes are the most important 4th century BC tumuli on the lower Dnieper. From the first came the forefront of a horse's decorative plate depicting a goddess whose lower part ends in snakes, the mother of royal Scythians according to Herodotus.

The Alexandropol tumulus, situated half way between Nikopol and Dnepropetrovsk, belongs to the last royal graves. It was 21 m high, its periphery measured 320 m, its shaft was 7.5 m deep, and it had lateral corridors and chambers. Many small fragments of decorative gold objects have been found, even if robbers apparently took away the most important items. From Dort-Oba near Pastak the tumulus had more graecized gold ornaments, as did other tombs in the direct vicinity of the Bosporan kingdom. The silver gilded vessel from the third of the "Častyje kurgany" near Voronež is similar to that of **Kul-Oba**. It represents a negotiation between Scythian nobles, one is reaching for the other's bow, perhaps recognizing the other's superiority. The Kul-Oba tumulus near Kerč was constructed of dressed stone. In the burial chamber there was a wooden sarcophagus. The main person wore two bracelets with protomae of sphinxes, one armband with mythological scenes, and a neck ring with finials in the shape of mounted Scythians. The gold-plated sheath of the sword was decorated with animals fighting, and a phiale with Gorgo heads. Besides the sarcophagus there was a burial of a woman with a diadem of electrum, her neck ring terminated in rams' heads. Above the ears she wore two roundels as pendants with the head of **Athena** Parthenos. The buried woman probably hold in her hands the famous Kul-Oba vase depicting the story of the origin of the Scythian royal dynasty - of the three sons of **Heracles** and the Snail Goddess, of whose only the youngest mastered the use of Heracles' bow. At the other wall of the chamber there was a burial of a servant, with seven knives, and in a small hole horse bones, helmet and greaves. A silver rhyton with ram's head and three globular vessels with animals fighting also belonged to this complex. Some thieves penetrated the excavation by night and found under a stone plate a third grave, with a shield sema of gold, representing a stag with griffin on his body.

The site Bolšaja Bliznica on the **Taman peninsula** yielded three independent graves of noble women. The best investigated is the grave of the "priestess of **Demeter**", with objects suggesting her cult, such as plaques with busts of Demeter, **Kore** and **Heracles**, and with a decorative plate from a tall crown; the two bracelets from the tomb terminated in jumping lions; the phalerae from her grave have representations of **Amazonomachy** and Gigantomachy. Another priestess buried in the same kurgan wore a gold-plated cap with Nikai, Maenads and Satyrs dancing; she also had splendid rings on her fingers, with figures of lions and of an oriental hero fighting a lion. From the first of the two other undisturbed graves in the same kurgan rich gold jewellery was unearthed— necklaces and earrings—from the second (male burial) fragments of an ivory plate with fine engravings, similar to those from Kul-Oba and Vergina. Another robbed chamber shows on its ceiling a fine painting of Demeter or Kore en face. The pectoral from Bolšaja Bliznica is similar to that from **Tolstaja** mogila, while the rings bear representations of **Aphrodite** and **Eros**.

The tumulus of the Kuban region is the last of the series of kurgans in the area of Karagodeaush, south of the lower flow of the river. The chamber was built of dressed stone and plastered, the roof was of wooden beams. At the entrance there were remains of a wagon and of two or three horses. On the left side of the chamber there was, among fragments of a wooden sarcophagus, a skeleton of a young lady. Her headdress was decorated with a high triangular plate, with representations in three rows. The lower represented a sitting woman in the centre flanked by other veiled figures. The middle one depicted a biga with a driver and the higher another



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standing female figure. Arm rings of massive gold of the lady have finishings in the form of sea horses. In the fourth chamber the male corpse wore a neck ring with lions attacking boars.

### 2.4. Other Scythian tumuli

Of the tombs uncovered in the second half of the twentieth century, the most attractive discoveries were made in the Ukraine and in the Lower Kuban area, but in the turn of the century the interest shifted especially towards Central Asia and south Siberia. Ukraine yielded many important finds. The Bratoljubskij kurgan preserved also in a niche a conical object with representations of animals fighting, less influenced by Greek art than most other items with figural decoration, and a splendid phiale with horse heads, a masterpiece reminding one of the horses of the Parthenon, all still of a late 5th century date. In the [Gajmanova](#) mogila near Balki in Zaporozhje the most outstanding find is a silver gilded bowl with Scythians negotiating a contract; the vessel was hidden in a niche at the periphery of the tumulus, while in the centre there was only a tomb of a warrior with bow and arrow, who had to protect magically the entrance into the tomb. The kurgan excavated in 1954 near Melitopol brought especially one of the goryts with the representation of the youth of [Achilles](#); the most famous of all, the Tolstaja mogila near Ordžonikidze, was excavated in 1971. It was 8 and half meters high and contained 1500 m<sup>3</sup> of earth. The central chamber was also robbed, but the lateral chamber, 15 m under the top of the barrow, was left undisturbed. This chamber contained secondary buried remains of a woman and of a two-to-three-year old boy. The woman was laid on a wooden bier, originally covered with a baldachin with gold ornaments; similar sheets decorated the dress of the deceased. The woman wore many jewels. The boy's interment was also richly furnished, and the chamber contained several human sacrifices: one girl-servant, one charioteer, one warrior with bow and arrows and one female cook with kitchen utensils. The excavators suggested that the lady was a regent in the name of the small boy, heir to the throne after his father died. The central chamber was out of order after the robbers, but remains of armour and weapons and iron cauldrons could be identified, as well as three pairs of horses with three charioteers as human victims. But in the small lateral corridor a sword in a gold sheath and a gold pectoral were found, the latter being perhaps the most outstanding masterpiece of all 4th century B.C. Graeco-Scythian jewellery. The upper [frieze](#) of the pectoral shows scenes from Scythian life, with Scythians milking mares, examining a fur jacket, and calf and foal suckling their mothers. The middle frieze is ornamental. The lower shows griffins and lions attacking a horse, stag and boar; in the corners dogs chase hares. Tolstaja mogila lies near Čertomyk, [Soloča](#) and Velká Bliznica; the Gerros country mentioned by Herodotus is thus situated between the Zaporozhje, Dnepropetrovsk and Nikopol.

The Adygei barrows on the territory of neighbouring Maeotians brought to light important new finds, especially a rhyton with representations of Gigantomachy, composed from works of different periods (the relief sheet is much earlier than the vessel), and two mid 5th century BC Panathenaic amphorae.

The rich kurgans in Central Asia and Siberia are equally attractive, but they are outside the scope of this entry.

In the steppe the royal Scythian tumuli were always visible thanks to their size, but there are of course a number of smaller and poorer of their class. The latter usually contained some pottery with food and drink originally, horse harness and weapons – akinakes, i.e. short swords (mainly in male graves, but exceptions of graves of “[Amazons](#)” are also known); in the female graves hand mirrors, knives and more modest jewellery than in the royal graves are the rule.

Rich Scythian graves are also known from Rumania and Hungary; likewise they have poles around the grave chamber with magical openwork bells or rattles (Gyöngyios), and shield semata are also known (especially the stags from Zöldhálompuszta and Tapiószentmárton), besides the more common horse-bits. The revision of the famous Scythian tomb at Witaszkowo (Vettersfelde) in Upper Lusatia (SW Poland) has shown that the shield sema with akinakes and other gold objects did not belong to a burial. They were part of a sacrifice in a well; the new excavations descended deeper into the well and revealed a large number of “North Pontic” glass beads and fine, but hand-made vessels of the shape of phiale mesomphalos.

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1. Herod., IV, 71-73.



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2. Herod., IV, 73.

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### Glossary :

	<b>amphora, the</b> from the greek words "αμφι" (on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.
	<b>cloisonné enamel</b> Powdered frit placed in between empty spaces created by a thin metal wire that follows the shape of a preconsidered pattern. After being heated, this enamelled glass could intensify the colours of the depicted design.
	<b>crater, the</b> from the greek verb "κεράννυμι" (to mix). Big, open vessel for mixing wine with water. The wine was then poured into oinochoae. There are various craters' forms depending on body and handle shape: column-, volute-, calyx-, and bell crater. They were usually placed in the middle of the room where symposia were held-
	<b>frieze (1. architecture), (2. painting)</b> 1. The part of the entablature resting on the architrave and below the cornice. In the Doric order the frieze is decorated with two alternative motives, namely the triglyph and metope, while in the Ionic order the frieze is a decoratively carved band. 2. Decorative horizontal band that sweeps parts of a vessel or the highest part of the walls in a room.
	<b>gorytus, the</b> Bow and arrow holder. This word derives from the word «χωρυτός» of the ancient sources which means "to include bows". By placing both arrows and bows in a holder, the warrior was able to have his hands free.
	<b>niche</b> Semi-circular recess on the surface of the wall.
	<b>phiale, the</b> A (metal, rarely clay) shallow vessel with an open rim. Used primarily in libations.
	<b>rhyton, the</b> libation vessel with an outlet at the bottom of the vessel allowing the slow outflow of the liquid.

### Sources

Herodotus, *Histories*, IV, 71-73.