



Book Reviews

SCYTHIANS: WARRIORS OF ANCIENT SIBERIA EDITED BY ST JOHN SIMPSON AND SVETLANA PANKOVA

British Museum & Thames & Hudson, London. 368pp, 453 colour and B&W illustrations, tables, hb, ISBN 978-0-500-02128-6, £40.00

The scale of this exhibition is made apparent in the map that is needed to represent it that graces the magnificent accompanying catalogue, legacy to this landmark in Eurasian archaeology: from Vladivostok to Warsaw, from Riyadh to Krasnoyarsk. The British Museum's recent blockbuster: *Scythians: Warriors of ancient Siberia* provided an excellent encounter with the peoples who inhabited huge swathes of Eurasia in the first millennium BC and their often exquisite and astonishing culture. There was plenty of bling and wow factor to satisfy even the most materially indulgent – from the initial rush of gold to the tattooed human skins from Scythian burials – and copious context and background, including fascinating examples from the archives of Peter the Great.

We have been fortunate to see the Pazyryk materials in their long-term home in the Hermitage, and also to visit sites and museums in southern Siberia, with its exceptional rock art and museums full of wonders, such as the plastered death masks. The curators of the exhibition succeeded in retaining some of the atmosphere of the Russian museums which lent so generously to this show, and the quirky graphics and distinctive colour schemes transported us back to St Petersburg and Minusinsk. There were (fortunately) none of the guides with pointing sticks, ubiquitous in Russian museums, steering us around the exhibition – although a little such guidance may have been useful for the hordes around us on the day we visited, some of whom could have benefited from a little more direction in moving through the show. Taking in most of Eurasia in the short time afforded to take in such a wealth of discoveries and geography was a little disorientating.

While the occasional references by early chroniclers such as Herodotus provide tantalising glimpses of the Scythians, it is the material culture, so amazingly well preserved in the cold dry conditions of the steppe that really brings these people to life. After queuing with the rest to gape and gawp in wonder at the gold, as practicing archaeologists we particularly enjoyed the expert selection made by St John Simpson and his Russian collaborators: the false beard made of human hair, the lumps of cheese in a leather bag, the hemp seeds so suggestive of

transcendent experiences. We joined in the jostling to marvel at the extraordinary shoes and trousers, alongside the body parts from Pazyryk.

There was plenty for those desiring a more thematic approach to their treasure. The elaboration of materiel of ancient warfare was exemplified by the plentiful armour, weaponry and horse trappings. As students we encountered something known as ‘the animal style’ in prehistoric art: here the symbolism of griffins, horses, tigers is evidence in so many media – from gold clasps to felt hangings. We were especially intrigued by the cheetah-head object. Personal appearance was clearly of great importance. Shaved heads and beards (including false ones) for the men, and piled-up braided wimples for the women: along with all the tattoos and the emphasis on the technology of travel, albeit horses and saddles, suggests the Scythians could have taught the denizens of the Mad Max movies a thing or two.

The introductory section on the history of archaeology was exemplary. We delighted in the etchings of St Petersburg and the original 18th-century watercolours of the gold plaques from Peter the Great’s Siberian Collection. We speculated on whether the prehistoric Scythians, with all their attention to how they presented themselves to each other and the world, would have felt bested by their 18th-century discoverer, Nicolaas Witsen, resplendent in his coiffured curls and laces. And we left the exhibition ruminating on the immensity of the influence and legacy of the Scythians, with their bone chopsticks from China and coral beads from oceans so distant from their central Eurasian homelands, and the achievement of the generations of archaeologists who have revealed their story.

At last, but by no means the least, we need to return to the publication accompanying the exhibition. It is not only an excellent catalogue but also a first class text book that goes far beyond what was on display. The essays, written by a wide range of specialists, provides an up to date survey about the periods and the regions concerned for the English speaking domain knowledge, as well as allowing those who were not able to see the exhibition to ‘take part’ in it by looking at the superb illustrations.

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