

The Indo-Aryan Image of “Raja-Sardula” among the Saryarka Nomads

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ABSTRACT This paper explores ethnographic questions of the early Saka (Scythian) tribes in the Saryarka region (Central and North Kazakhstan, South Trans-Urals). Written sources about the early Eurasian steppe nomads are not available. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine some archaeological data, mainly artefacts with the image of a tiger manufactured in the so-called Scythian animal style, and to provide new insights into the ethnographic knowledge of these tribes. The novelty of the study resides in the interpolation, for the first time, of ethnographic data concerning Indo-Aryan people and archaeological finds of the Saryarka early nomads.

INTRODUCTION

The Saka tribes of the Tasmola culture are a “silent” people who did not leave any written records. The country of the Tasmola-culture bearers, located in the Saryarka region wide spread between the southern Trans-Urals and the northern and central Kazakhstan, has been considered as a remote, barbarian land by the communities of the ancient agricultural centers (Beisenov and Ermolenko 2014; Beisenov and Kitov 2014; Tairov 2014). Researchers can reconstruct their worldview through semiological analysis of archaeological artefacts. That is, the explorer should pay attention firstly, to the objective world, into which both material and spiritual cultures are reflected (Raevsky 2001). Subsequently, archaeological sources can “voice” (explain) the ethnographic data about people close by origin. In the case of the early Saka tribes, these were Iranian and Indo-Aryan people (Harmatta 1951; Trubachev 1999; Kullanda 2011). In addition, Zarathustra and his followers reformed the religious cults of the Iranian people of the Middle East during the process of codification of the Avesta. Therefore, the ethnographic sources related to the Indo-Aryan people of the Indian Peninsula, which seem to be more conservative and symptomatically close to the ancient Indo-Iranian people, are more preferable to compare with (Eliade 2002; Boyce 2003). These materials preserve information about the role of the “military male” in society.

Objectives

The aim of this paper is to examine some archaeological data, mainly artefacts with the im-

age of a tiger manufactured in the so-called Scythian animal style, and to provide new insights into the ethnographic knowledge of these tribes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper explored the *Tasmola* culture. It was one of the largest cultural and historical formations of early Saka time. This archaeological culture was located across the steppes of South Trans-Ural, North and Central Kazakhstan. Moreover, the bearers of this culture in virtue of their distinguishing features of way of life and mobile economy culturally played the role of link between the settled and farming civilisations of Middle Asia and the hunting, fishing and gathering communities of Western Siberia.

According to the archaeological data of the Late Bronze Age of the Eurasian steppes, the earliest nomadic cultures were developed in the second millennium BC from the North Black Sea to the Inner Asia. (Chernikov 1960; Gryaznov 1983; Di Cosmo 2002; Barfield 2009). These Scythian and Saka communities were close to each other and had similar forms of artefacts – weapons, horse harnesses and art objects made in animal style (Gratch 1980). However, some researchers highlight the ethnic diversity of the people involved in the formation of the so-called “Scythian cultural and historical community” (Moshkova 1991; Olkhovsky 1997).

The development of nomadic cattle rising was preceded in the Eurasian steppes by the long-lasting evolution of ancient pastoralists (herders and farmers) communities of the Bronze Age (Akishev 1972; Avanesova 1991; Kuzmina 1994).

Formed at the turn of the second - first Millennium BC, the nomadic lifestyle was the economic basis for the development of societies with a great creative, artistic potential. This nomadic world, thanks to the physical and psychological flexibility of its representatives became an important factor in the dynamic and impulsive development of the Eurasian cultural space. Expressive jewellery, with mainly animal images and battle and clash scenes were one of the main symbols of the early nomadic culture (Ilyinskaya 1971; Masson 1989; Korenyako 2002; Raevsky 2001; Cheremissin 2008). The boundaries of this artistic world were so distant as if there had been a “*Big Bang*”: new fashion and models of behaviour spread very fast over a very wide area. Substantial changes took place in the socio-political sphere and societies with complex social hierarchy were formed as well (Masson 1989).

The archaeological material showed that a high degree of militarisation was typical of the early nomadic societies, indicating that the inspiration for artists and craftsmen was influenced by a “*substantial-military*” background, that is, the status of a warrior was the most honourable and worthy of mention also in art (Galyamichev and Michailin 2003). This explains the military expansion of the Eurasian steppe-dwellers, which had the form of direct migration (Molodin 1998; Kissel and Havrin 2012; Kozintsev 2012).

The Eurasian nomads completely surrounded different types of civilisation and societies of Eurasia into an enormous area (Middle-East Kingdoms, ancient European tribes, Chinese Principality of East Zhou and others) (Artamonov 1974; Kyzlasov 1979; Gryaznov 1980; Bokovenko 1994; Khabdulina 1994; Kovalev 1998; Itina and Yablonsky 2001; Savinov 2002; Chugunov 2006; Tairov 2007; Botalov 2008; Rogers 2011).

However, in order to avoid dipping into flat generalisations and ethnographic details, it is essential to be limited geographically and historically, and to connect single region and a single issue if possible toughly identified, as Digar (1989) remarked. Therefore, the researchers chose *the Tasmola* archaeological culture as the target of this paper, and more narrowly, authors were selected to analyse the image of the leader or ruler in the culture of the early Saka tribes of the above-mentioned region.

The Tasmola Archaeological Culture

The Tasmola archaeological culture received a scientific substantiation in the book entitled

“*The Ancient Culture of Central Kazakhstan*” published in 1966 (Margulan et al. 1966). The reason for its identification and definition as an independent historical and cultural formation was because it was the material of more than 300 funerary monuments in the Shiderty river valley of the North-East of Kazakhstan, explored and studied by the Central Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition.

Because of more than a decade of excavations, the archaeological material allowed to characterize the funeral ceremony, to define the chronological framework of *the Tasmola* monuments and to highlight the main features of the material culture and nomadic households in the explored region. Finally, Kadyrbayev, one of the most important and active Kazakh archaeologists between the middle and the second half of the twentieth century, who explored mainly early Saka antiquities, identified the local peculiarity of the cultural development of the tribes of Central Kazakhstan in the Early Iron Age and labelled this phenomenon as “*Tasmola*”.

Since the end of the Eighties, a new period started in the exploration of this culture. In the Eighties and Nineties, the number of the excavated and investigated monuments dated from the eighth or seventh up to the sixth century and in the widespread territory of Urals and Kazakhstan steppes increased substantially. Archaeologists began to distinguish over this vast area into three distinctive cultures (or regional *facies*), which shared some cultural features: *the Tasmola* (in Central Kazakhstan), *the Ulubai and Tasmola* (in North Kazakhstan) and *the Bobrov and Tasmola* (in South Trans-Urals) (Khabdulina 1994; Beisenov and Ermolenko 2014; Beisenov and Kitov 2014; Tairov 2014).

These monuments of *the Tasmola* culture are now of great interest not only in relation to the cultural regionalisation of Central Kazakhstan but also regarding the largest historical and ethnographic world of the early Saka communities widespread in the Eurasian expanse.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

During the formation of the cultural and socio-political peculiarities of *the Tasmola*, as well as other early Saka cultures, a great role was played by the nomadic, mobile economy, which according to Artamonov lead to a “*serious re-organisation of the previous economic and so-*

cial relations" and to an increase of militarisation in the whole culture (Artamono 1973). New ways of life and economy constrained virtually the entire male population of the early Sakas communities to be in constant combat readiness. It is not possible to disagree with Gryaznov that under so stressful life conditions, the "more brave, bold and adventurous warriors" achieved the top of the societal structure and that constant military clashes "gave rise to folk heroes" (1961). In general, Gryaznov has described the society of early nomads as "heroic" or "a society of the heroic age".

A distinctive artistic feature of the early nomads is their special representation of the animal world and its characters. The artefacts manufactured in the animal-style are among the main sources of information, explaining the worldview or the ideological (including cosmological, theological) views of different individuals and the completely cultural space, denoted within the *Tasmola* archaeological culture. The *Tasmola*-culture bearers, like many other ancient tribes, which evaluated the reality through the prism of mythological thinking, being not abstract by nature, require that the animal image as a symbol must have a clear and tight connections with its real prototype.

The bestiary of the *Tasmola* tribes includes images of wild boars, griffins, goats, deers, horses, and so on. The main purpose of this paper is to explore solely the image of the tiger/lion/leopard.

The image of the tiger is widely attested: from *burial mounds 3, 4 and 6 of the Tasmola V* graveyard; from *burial mounds 2, 4 and 5 of Taldy 2*; from the *Tasmola* burial mound of *Karashoki* and, lastly, from *burial mound 5 of Kichigino I* graveyard. The oldest finds with the image of a tiger (four embossed figures) in gold found in the *kurgans 3, 4 and 6 of the Tasmola V* burial ground. The plaque from the *grave 3* served as a decoration of the forehead belt of a horse, while the others decorated the clothes of the buried. According to Kadyrbaev, these artefacts depict tigers, standing and in a relaxed pose, with the head turned to the right and accurately detailed claws and eyes in the form of two rings. The discoverer dated these items back between the end of the sixth and the fifth century BC (Margulan et al. 1966).

Very significant is the image of the tiger discovered recently by Beisenov in the cemetery of

Taldy 2, located 44 km from Karkaralinsk city, in the Karaganda region. This ancient cemetery includes seven large "elite" burial mounds. Among the others, the *kurgan 5* contained the inhumation of a male individual of about 30-35 year old, characterised by many injuries, as revealed by the anthropological analysis performed on the bones. Possibly, he belonged to the military elite class. A 25-30 year old man buried in *burial mound 4* and a man and a woman, both of 50-55 years old, buried in *burial mound 2*. The excavation of this graveyard allowed recovering of about 200 gold finds and more than 22,000 decorations of fine production. Researchers found fourteen bronze arrowheads and stone beads. Among the gold findings, those worth noting are the figures of a feline, "vorvorki" with the image of a predator, clips belonging to skin-manufactured belts and earrings. There were also pendants and gold foil fragments. The number of the discovered gold artefacts undoubtedly indicated that the burial belonged to a member of the highest social status of the nomadic elite of the region (Beisenov 2011).

According to the author's paper, the garments of the inhumated in the *Taldy 2* kurgan were ornated by figurines of a feline: a tiger. This animal image, represented in its profile, is well recognisable and has many analogies over a wide territory, from Central Kazakhstan to Tuva (*Arzhan 2*). According to Beisenov, the image of a tiger decorating the garments of a valiant knight, hero or king, assessing his special status, had the same symbolical meaning of a predator skin chased during hunting (Beisenov 2011). Moreover, this latter scholar noted the stylistic similarity between the images of predators from *Taldy 2* and the finds from *Tagisken* and *Tasmola*; however, the tigers from the *Taldy 2* burial mounds are less realistic than the others mentioned here.

The same archaeologist also published some data about the excavations of the *Karashoki* burial mound (in the Karkaralinsk district of the Karaganda region), where a sewing plaque in the form of an image of a standing tiger, in profile drawn, was found in one of the burial mounds belonging to the *Tasmola* culture. The striped skin of the feline is characterised by S-shaped curls (the openwork technique). The long tail of the tiger, hanging down, has a spiral at its tip, and paws long sharp claws. Analogous works are pointed out among artefacts found in *Semirech'e* (*Zhalauli* hoard) and in the *Pazyryk*

culture widespread in the Altai Mountain (Beisenov 2011). These figures of tigers used as bridle fasteners are similar to the animals figured on the surface of the wooden sarcophagus from the second barrow of *Bashadar*, in the Altai, which can be dated back to the sixth-fifth century BC (about from 650 till 390 BC) (Rudenko 1960).

Researchers brought series of artefacts with the image of a tiger in 2008 from the excavation of *the barrow 5* of the *Kichigino I* graveyard. This kurgan was the biggest in the burial ground, being about 35 m in diameter and 1 m in height. So far, it is one of the richest burials of the Tasmola culture of the southern Trans-Urals region. “*The analysis of the grave goods from the burial chamber 1 allows to state that the kurgan 5 of Kichigino I was built in the second half of the 7th century BC, possibly at the end of this century. The size and the complexity of the structure of the burial construction, as well as the finds of the burial inventory indicate that the buried man belonged to the military and aristocratic elite of the nomadic society inhabiting the southern Trans-Urals*” (Tairov and Botalov 2010).

Among the grave goods, worth mentioning is a belt decorated with numerous bronze cramps figured as heads of antelopes looking in different directions, and two plaques with a loop on the back in the form of a standing feline. On the left side of the inhumation individual were leather *gorytos*, decorated with five embossed gold plaque in the form of a lying feline. Between the *gorytos* and the buried man was a large flat stone hone on the belt with a leather thong, the knots of which partly covered two gold beads. A bronze plaque decorated by *protomas* of two horses facing different directions wrapped the end of the thong. The belt was included in this plaque by means of two buttons with rhombic buckle-plates. Another plaque was figured as a feline standing in a ring with a stylised eagle’s head over the shoulders, placed between the last mentioned element and the plaque of the belt tip. This latter represents a stylised head of a bird of prey: a hook in the form of a horse’s head on a long neck attached to the ring through an additional component, an embossed gold plaque in the form of a lying feline located on the breast of the buried individual, and a gold earring in the form of a massive ring with an embossed figure of a lying feline soldered to it, was close to the temporal bone of the buried man (Tairov and

Botalov 2010). The authors stated that *Kichigino* decorations represented a lion or a snow leopard. On the contrary, researchers hypothesise that the artefacts depict a tiger. Moreover, further confirmation of our assumption arise exactly from the tight analogies between *the Kichigino* tiger and the embossed gold plaques from the above mentioned Central Kazakhstan barrows, *Tasmola V* and *Taldy 2*. Thus, currently available data allow researchers to identify two main directions of the cultural and possibly ethnic ties of the Tasmola tribes, according to the analysis of these tiger images. The first direction identifies the world of the early Saka tribes of eastern Aral, while the second, the world of eastern Scythian tribes of the Sayan-Altai mountain region.

The excavations of the burial mounds of *Tagisken* and *Uigarak* have brought to light a number of unique discoveries manufactured in animal style, including images of a feline. Thirteen gold appliquéés have been found in the burial mound 53 of southern *Tagisken* (dated back to the 5th century BC), among them, one served as a fastening element of a quiver, while the others decorated its bottom. A gold plaque, representing a lying or running lion with the head drawn in profile was in burial mound 31. Researchers found artefacts of different sizes in the burial mounds 4 and 6: pair of girth buckles depicting a seated lion and four gold small plaques depicting a seated lion with heads turned three-quarters to one side in *the kurgan 45* (dated back to the seventh-sixth century BC). In addition, scientists found a similar buckle in *the burial mound 49* of *Uigarak* (Vishnevskaya and Itina 1971).

The image of a walking feline (possibly a lion), found in the barrow of the fifth-fourth century BC of *Ust’-Bukon’* in eastern Kazakhstan, is close to *the Tasmola*-culture figures. Other comparisons: a find from *the barrow 9* of *Kuilug-Khem I*, the predators from *burial mounds 1* and *2* of *Kosh-Pei* (fourth century BC) as well as the feline image from *the Sulug-Khem I* burial (Tuva) and gold sewn plaques from *grave 2* of *the Bol’shoy Poltav barrow* (Artamonov 1973; Davis-Kimball et al. 1995). In *the burial mound 2* of *Arzhan*, in the Tuva region, researchers found other tigers similar to *the Tasmola* specimens. Here, in 2001, the main “royal” burial was in very good conditions of preservation. Because burial is located deep in the bedrock, nobody noticed and did not plunder it. In the middle of the wood-

en chamber, there were the inhumation remains of a man and a woman. The abundance of gold decorations in the funerary inventory and the detailed work of topographical fixation of the artefacts made by the archaeologists allowed the recreation of the clothes of the royal couple and to understand many other features of the funerary ritual.

The male garment had more than 2,500 gold embossed figures of a feline (a tiger). *The predators*, drawn in profile, are facing opposite directions. On its reverse side, standing felines were in a row soldered with their heads turned to the right (Cheremissin 2008). The owner wore this "Parade of Animals" on his clothes. This assessment can be supported by the scrapes and scratches on its surface and the loss of a feline figure on the recto of the bar-shaped torque; probably it was lost a long time ago. On this frontal side, four rows of 22 feline figures were present, while on the upper, two rows of 23 pieces. It is conceivable that the number of the figures had a specific meaning. Plaques decorated the female garment. They represented the same predator, but the felines on the woman's suit faced only left. A different technique of stamping thin gold sheets applied in creating these figures. Numerous and small zoomorphic figures have been used to create a decoration in the form of hanging down flames. The woman cloth had plaques, mainly, on the shoulders and on the back (Tsareva 2009; Chugunov 2011).

Guzalov, taking into account the symbolic meaning of the wolf's image, considered this image as the symbol and the main marker of the Indo-European military brotherhood, a social institution widely spread since ancient times in the steppe region of Eurasia (2005). The tight association between a "predator" and a "warrior" linked to "a behavioural model of a warrior whose prowess was measured by murder and was correlated and compared with the animal behaviour of a wild feline. In the ecstasy of battle, the warrior was like a wild beast, falling into the "furorheroicus". According to same scholars, the comparative and typological analysis of the worldview of the Central Asian nomads shows a direct correlation between predators and military structures (Cheremissin 2008).

However, it's not excluded that in other regions and cultural areas there were a variety of other symbols, besides the wolf, testifying a war-related "bestial fury", as is the case for example

of the image of the bear among the Scandinavians - Berserkers (Gutsalov 2005; Ivantchik 2005). Researchers assume the same in the *Tasmola* area for the image of the tiger. Establishing a parallel between the wolf and the feline, Cheremissin believes that their images are very close in the Scytho-Siberian art, in virtue of the similar behaviour of the two wild beasts while hunting: both predators choke and suffocate their quarry. In the toreutic of the Ordos region and Minusinsk basin, the representation of a tiger while holding a hoofed animal by the neck is widespread (Cheremissin 2008). The image of the tiger in the early Saka culture fully meets the requirements of its geographic range in the ancient times. The tiger (Trans-Caucasian, Caspian or Turanian – in Latin *Panthera Tigris virgata*) inhabited Central Asia and Kazakhstan until the nineteenth century (Krechetov 1965; Sludskii 1973; Erzhanov 2001).

Now, in order to understand as best as possible the archaeological artefacts and their semantic meaning, it is necessary to turn our attention to the ethnographic sources about the Indo-Aryans. Adhering to the view that the Indo-Iranian tribes lived long in Central Kazakhstan and surrounding regions (Kuzmina 1991), it is quite possible to imagine that part of the cultural heritage of the Indo-Aryan tribes have remained in the material and spiritual culture of the Saka. Some researchers interested in Indian and Indo-Aryan folklore documented a very active use of the so-called "animal" metaphors that liken a hero-warrior to a strong and fierce beast – for example, a tiger (*nara-siardula* man-tiger, *bharata-siardula* tiger-Bharata, *raja-siardula* king tiger, and so on.) (Maretina 2012; Vasil'kov 2012). Thus, according to these scholars, these metaphors are founded at age-based and status-based social institutions typical of the archaic tribal societies (Vasil'kov 2012). In order to confirm this statement, the story about Dushyanta king, from the "Mahabharata" (the most important Indian epos, which is composed of a complex set of stories, parables, legends, etc., in the centre of which lies the confrontation between Pandavas and Kauravas and the description of the battle between them), can be reported (Grintser 1974; Neveleva 1991). In addition to the metaphor "man-tiger" in relation to the king, we have to mention the king's entourage participating in the forest hunting labelled "forest dwellers" and "hungry men-tigers". "Forest-dweller" is la-

belled in another place in the same book as one of the main protagonists of the Ardjuna's works (Arjuna was the third of the Pandavas brothers and the military leader of them; he embodies the idea of the highest military virtues). The researchers relate this term to the concept of an aged-based and status-based social community, a military "forest brotherhood" which can be correlated to the word "vratiti" (Wreaths). Wreaths were small groups of men, members of the highest Varna, who lost their status or military squads of young boys who left without inheritance and engaged in robbery for a living. In some ancient Indian cities of the sixth-fifth century BC, these groups were able to establish their authority (Kshatriya oligarchies) (Vasil'kov 2012). About the intersection of the images of the wolf dog and the tiger, we already treated that in the previous pages, but we have to mention that in the Indian material, we could find another proof. In the culture of the contemporary pastoral tribes of modern Deccan and South India, there was a good number of suggestions derived from the archaic culture of the ancient Indo-Aryans. In the mythology of the people of southern India, the images of the gods Khandoba, Mallari and Mylar were very widespread. Their devotees act as god's spirits in the rituals. They participate in the "wild hunt" of the god. They were like faithful dogs. This tradition probably dates back to the wolf or dog symbolism of the Indo-European military alliances (Vasil'kov 2012). Beside of it, they represent themselves as "dogs" and call themselves as "vaghya" (in Marathi language) and "vaggayya" (in Kannada), from a Prakrit form of ancient Indian "vyaghra" meaning "tiger" (Vasil'kov 2012; Vertogradova 2002). Two of the attributes of the Bhaktas of Khandoba-Mylar are a bag of tiger skin worn and turmeric powder used for ritual purposes. These cults connected with the origin of a worship tradition of the Indo-Aryan deity Rudra, who seated on a tiger skin and venerated in the Maharashtra as Waghkoba – "the father of the tigers". In addition, always in this tradition, Shiva-Bhairava had a dog and rode a tiger, or had an animal that combines the characteristics of a dog and a tiger. The Vedic ritualistic text "Shatapatha-Brahman" wrote that, because of the damage induced by Tvashtar in retaliation to the murder by Indra of his son Visvarupa, from the body of Indra, originate various components of his heroic energy. Leaving the Indra's body, they transformed into diverse

phenomena of the world. In detail, from the urine originated rage in the form of a wolf, from the intestines originated fury in the form of a tiger, and while from the blood originated power transformed into a lion. While performing rites associated to with Indra, the followers drank "sura", a strong beverage. In the bowl of the "sura", there were hairs of a wolf, a tiger and a lion. Reviewing these results, it is possible to state that the names-epithets, the titles or nicknames of the tribal or military union leaders, and of local kings, reflect without doubts the "tiger/lion" symbolism which can be dated back to the institute of military brotherhoods (Vasil'kov 2012).

CONCLUSION

According to data on the Indo-Aryan folklore and epic, tiger image became the symbol of the royal power among the Sakas in Central Kazakhstan since the first half of the first millennium BC. For instance, *the Tasmola* rulers remains in *the barrow 5 of the Taldy 2* burial ground called "man-tiger" or "king-tiger".

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