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Pazyryk Art in Context

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Abstract

Nearly a century has passed since the initial discovery of the Pazyryk kurgan complex and its tattooed mummies, yet our understanding of these Iron Age steppe nomads remains stagnant. The current project serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, I critique and readjust the Near Eastern-centric perspectives and paradigms utilized in the study of Pazyryk art in extant literature. A new Pazyryk-centric analytical framework is proposed, which need not be defined by a unidirectional Near Eastern influence, which undermines the cultural agency and intentionality visible in the archaeological corpus. Secondly, I introduce a distinction which acknowledges the higher social and cultural importance of the practice and permanent result of Pazyryk tattooing, more so than other artistic exercises resulting in motifs that decorate the material objects. This is supported by thorough comparisons with Achaemenid Persian motifs seen on material objects versus predominantly local Pazyryk tattoo art. It is possible to conclude that Pazyryk tattoo art is reserved as a medium with great socio-cultural significance void of clear Achaemenid influences. From this a detailed “Pazyryk Style” is established. Based on the evidence, I argue that a Pazyryk-centric approach is essential in striving towards a holistic and faithful reconstruction archaeologically; and that Pazyryk discourse can benefit immensely if these biases are no longer employed.

Introduction

Nearly a century has passed since the initial discovery of the Pazyryk burial mounds and their tattooed occupants in the valleys of the Altai mountains, yet our understanding of these Iron Age steppe nomads remains stagnant, especially within Western scholarship. Despite the subject enjoying much popularity within Soviet archaeological discourse throughout the 20th century, it remained comparatively inaccessible to Western researchers. The Pazyryk site constitutes one of the richest archaeological finds in the Scythian world with regards to both volume and quality. The greater Pazyryk mounds were particularly noteworthy, discovered to have housed four mummified individuals bearing tattoos; the first discovery of its kind and magnitude across the Eurasian steppes.

Sergei Rudenko's (1970) landmark volume, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia: The Pazyryk Burials of Iron Age Horsemen* was the foremost yet sole English source throughout the 1900s, which albeit comprehensive and meticulously detailed, proved to be lacking on its own. Recently, the discovery of previously undetected tattoos on three more individuals from the Pazyryk kurgans once again piqued Western interest (Barkova & Pankova 2005). It not only drew Western archaeologists to the subject, but also Russian Scythologists to publish their work in English language publications. The current project serves a twofold purpose: firstly to critique and readjust the Near Eastern-centric perspectives and paradigms utilized in the study of Pazyryk art, and by extension culture. A new Pazyryk-centric analytical framework is proposed, which need not be defined by a unidirectional Near Eastern influence which undermines the cultural agency and intentionality readily visible in the archaeological corpus. A Pazyryk style is formulated, situated within the broader frameworks of Scytho-Siberian animal style art. The

second aspect of this argument further demonstrates intentionality through identifying the performative and aesthetic incongruity of Pazyryk art on material objects and the human body, where the tattoos are seen as carrying a higher degree of cultural significance due to its visibility in the public sphere, its permanence, and ubiquity in the Greater Pazyryk kurgans.

Statement of Problem and Methodology

The identification of the Pazyryk peoples as a distinctive cultural unit had been predicated upon the geographical and chronological proximity of its gravesites, as well as artistic style. Pazyryk art in particular have been afforded extraordinary explanative power and semiotic importance in the absence of any written language, and is believed to be able to reveal as much as a linguistic system in actuality could (Cheremisin 2007, 2009; Polosmak 2000). Prior to further discussion, there is a need to clarify where Pazyryk culture existed based on extant literature, and how the current sample was chosen.

The boundaries of the Pazyryk cultural horizon have been expanded from its aggressively since the days of Rudenko, in light of recent discoveries of grave sites in the Ukok Plateau¹ (Polosmak & Molodin 2000), Mongolian Altai (Jordana et al. 2009) and modern Xinjiang (Polosmak 2021). Especially interesting are a pair of sites on the Ukok Plateau, Ak-Alakha-3 and Verkh-Kaldzhin-2, both of which contained mummified and tattooed individuals. In kurgan 1, at Ak-Alakha-3, the mummy of a woman was discovered with tattooed arms in 1993 (Pankova 2017: 69; Polosmak 1994, 1998). Two years later, archaeologists uncovered the body of a young man with tattoos covering his shoulders in kurgan 2 at Verkh-Kaldzhin-2 (Pankova 2017: 69; Polosmak 2000), bringing the number of tattooed mummies discovered in the Altai to six. Both

¹ Immediate southwest of Pazyryk proper.

of these burials are contemporaneous with greater Pazyryk mounds, having been constructed around 277-274 BCE (Francfort 2020; Pankova 2017). The dating, location and presence of tattoos have led to scholars including both sites within the Pazyryk cultural complex (Iwe 2013; Polosmak 1994). In spite of the evidence, attitudes towards the incorporation of the Ukok burials into Pazyryk proper remain ambivalent (see Polosmak 1994; Polosmak & Molodin 2000), where the material culture demonstrates unique aspects not found at Pazyryk. Recently, Polosmak (2021) ambitiously proposed a “Pazyryk Style” based on the modes of decoration found on personal ornaments, weapons, and horse riding equipment as reliable cultural indicators signaling membership within Pazyryk society in the context of several Pazyryk-related cemeteries in Xinjiang. With that being said, my inquiry is an attempt to uncover a “Pazyryk style” as a marker of culture, but it will be restricted to the four mummified individuals, found in the barrows at Pazyryk itself.

The problematic Near Eastern paradigm in the analysis of Pazyryk art has its roots in Rudenko’s (1970) volume, which whilst being an excellent referential work for this project, initiated the study of Pazyryk art, regardless of medium, by appealing to the Near East in search for a point of origin. Despite the influx of scholarly interest in the 21st century, most nevertheless approach the subject from the East, where effort is focused solely on identifying Near Eastern motifs and conventions found in the Altai. This problem is only compounded by the lack of English publications accessible to Western Scholarship, where this perspective reigns supreme. This is evident in Francfort’s (2020) piece, *Scythians, Persians, Greeks and Horses: Reflections on Art, Culture, Power and Empires in the Light of Frozen Burials and Other Excavations*, which delves into the possibility of Pazyryk artistic intentionality in how certain Achaemenid and Greek motifs appear to be more favored by the nomads; yet ultimately looks westward for

analogies and parallels instead of confronting the evidence present at Pazyryk whilst lacking the detail found in Rudenko (1970). The article comprises part of the proceedings of an international conference on the Scythians at the British Museum in 2017, culminating in the publication of *Masters of the Steppe: The Impact of the Scythians and Later Nomad Societies of Eurasia*, edited by Pankova and Simpson (2020). Even within the most recent major English language publication, studies of Pazyryk art still retained problematic paradigms found in Rudenko's work five decades prior. Admittedly, these comparative paradigms occupy an important place in the study of Pazyryk culture, but remain severely limited as an analytical framework. It cannot be denied that Achaemenid art is seen at Pazyryk, but this fact lacks any explanatory power without also taking into account a strong local tradition. It only serves to inform us as to the foreign influences present in the Pazyryk corpus, and the possible mechanisms of cultural transmission that allowed them to reach Siberia from the Near East. Looking for answers in the Near East fundamentally fails to contribute in identifying a local Pazyryk artistic tradition within the steppe context, and merely paints a one dimensional picture seemingly influenced by a unidirectional flow of culture. This faulty perspective is rooted in and continues to propagate the narrative of a lack of cultural complexity in nomadic societies compared to their sedentary neighbors. This can be seen in Murdock and Provost's (1973) rating scale of cultural complexity, where a sedentary way of life constitutes one of the main criteria for a civilized culture, a sentiment echoed by Krادين (2016, 2019). Barfield (2001: 10) labeled nomadic empires such as the Mongols and the Xiongnu as "shadow empires", where they are regarded as secondary phenomena whose existence would not have been possible organically. These models, built upon identifying culturally dominant cores and lesser peripheries, not only reveal theoretical anachronisms

derived from post-colonial discourses of power, they also strip nomadic societies of cultural agency, unable to prevail against the tides of assimilation and acculturation.

Prior to discussing methodology, it is important to briefly note the reason as to why an art historical approach is taken. A systematic analysis of artistic forms serves as an alternative avenue for establishing the distinctiveness of the Pazyryk cultural complex without appealing to methods rooted in physical anthropology so favored by Russian anthropologists and archaeologists to this day, which in turn inform archaeological paradigms bound by reified categories prevalent in ethnology and race studies.

The first of the two dominant methodologies is metric analysis, where measurements of osteological features across the entire human skeleton are utilized in comparisons with existing data from other populations. Thus, a biological lineage can be attained through examining how well these features match with any particular group, assuming that most of these traits can be inherited genetically (see Borodovsky & Tur 2015; Chikisheva 2000, 2002; Chikisheva et al. 2015; Moiseyev 2006; Rudenko 1970: 45). Besides osteology, mitochondrial DNA is also used extensively as markers of Pazyryk identity (see Voevoda et al. 2000; Pilipenko et al. 2015a, 2015b). It is paramount to stress that bioarchaeological analysis of the Pazyryk concerned with osteological evidence that demonstrate cultural behavior, such as body modification (Chikisheva et al. 2014, Murphy 2003) and trauma (Jordana et al. 2009) provide much greater contributions, and is not the subject of the critiques outlined above. Whilst genetics and metric analysis have their place in advancing understanding of the movements of ancient peoples and their lineages, they disregard the idiosyncrasies of human cultural interactions and the complexities of identity. They serve no function in advancing archaeological knowledge from a hermeneutical standpoint, and in no measure addresses the epistemological constraints of archaeology, nor determine past

human behavior and how they are manifested in processes of cultural development and exchange.

Having considered the Near Eastern biases in extant literature, as well as the inapposite nature in relying on physical anthropological approaches, the methodology utilized in this project addresses a gap in how the study of Pazyryk art is conducted, where motifs and styles are treated similarly and given equal significance no matter the medium. Instead, I introduce a distinction which acknowledges the higher social and cultural importance of the practice and permanent result of Pazyryk tattooing, more so than other artistic exercises resulting in motifs that decorate the material objects, whether ornamental or utilitarian in function. It is important to note that this theoretical approach is not predicated necessarily upon any theories as to how the Pazyryk may have viewed the body in different social spheres, but that there are observable differences in actuality within the artistic styles and motifs that are reserved only for tattoos and not on objects. Intentionality and agency is demonstrated in the fact that foreign, mostly Achaemenid Persian motifs are found to be experimented on and combined with local steppe artistic tradition by Pazyryk artists mostly on material objects, whereas the tattoos art bears little relation to the same Achaemenid styles found on the former. The excellent state of preservation of the Pazyryk barrows, combined with new and more accurate dates suggest that this comparison at the site level occurs within an archaeological vacuum and tight chronological conditions, contributing to its validity. It is also important to raise the notion that the dead do not bury themselves: only the tattoos on the subject were carried out and present during their lifetimes, attesting to the significance of these acts of body modification as valuable cultural markers.

Scythia and Pazyryk

Discussions surrounding the Pazyryk nomads necessitates the introduction of Scythia and the Scythians as archaeological categories. At the dawn of the 1st millennium BCE, new archaeological cultures with little resemblance to their Late Bronze Age predecessors appeared on the Eurasian Steppe, accompanied by a reorganization of the socio-political landscape. Among these burgeoning polities were the wider Scythian cultures, which encompassed the Iron Age pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppe belt, deserts and semi-deserts - stretching from the Carpathian and Pontic plains in Eastern Europe², to Siberia, Mongolia and Northern China (Khazanov 2014: 32; Shulga 2020). Their transient lifestyle dictates that archaeological material are only to be found in burial mounds, or kurgans of various sizes and scales. Collectively, they spoke the Scythian languages, part of the larger Iranian language family (Beisenov 2020: 43), but lacked a written language system; which contributes to a lack of emic historical records.³ Scythian material phenomena are noticeably uniform despite their vast geographical expanse, and are identified through the presence of the “Scythian triad”, consisting of weapons, horse riding equipment, and artifacts bearing “animal style” art. (Khazanov 2014; Shulga 2020; Taylor et al. 2020).

Animal style zoomorphic motifs are a major theme in Scythian art characterized by portrayals of native animal species (ungulates and birds) depicted in scenes of predation (see Figures 1-4) (Kisel, 2020: 210). Pazyryk animal style art can be traced back to the initial Scythian period in Siberia. The visual culture at early Scythian burials such as the Arzhan kurgan complex in Tuva, dated to between 9th and 7th centuries BCE (Caspari et al. 2018) showed

² Modern day Hungary and Ukraine respectively.

³ There exists a single isolated exception at Issyk Kurgan in Kazakhstan, which is the only epigraphic evidence of a Scythian/Saka language, but it has yet to be deciphered in any meaningful way (Hasanov 2015).

minimal Near Eastern influence and instead consisted solely of animal style (Frankfort 2020: 135). An iron arrowhead with gold ornaments from Arzhan-2 is decorated with a predatory scene featuring a raptor, with its head twisted backwards, falling upon an ungulate. It is one of the earliest examples of an animal style composition in Siberia, where contorted body parts can be seen in later Pazyryk art. Animalistic and figural art dominate the material assemblage at Pazyryk, and underpins a particular brand of Scytho-Siberian animal style.



Figs. 1-4: *Animal style across Scythia. Top left, clockwise: 1. Iron arrowhead with animal style predation scene, Arzhan-2, 9th-7th century BCE (Kisel 2020: 211). 2. Animal style composition on bone container, Tasmola culture, 8-5th century BCE (Beisenov 2020: 46). 3. Golden plaque, Siberian Collection of Peter the Great, ca. 4th-1st century BCE (Korolkova 2020, 219). 4. Applied decoration on a saddle from Pazyryk mound 1 (State Hermitage Museum archives⁴).*

⁴ <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/2751040>

The Scythians are further divided into eastern and western subgroups, predicated upon the geographical distribution of archaeological sites and supposed cultural divides. The westerly group, often referred to as the Black Sea or Pontic Scythians, inhabited the lands along and north of the Northern Black Sea coast from the 8th to the first half of the 3rd century BCE (see Fig. 5) (Polin 2020).



Fig. 5: Map of royal kurgans (triangles) and Olbia in Pontic Scythia (Piotrovsky 1973-1974: 11)

Archaeological reconstructions of Black Sea Scythia are inevitably underpinned by economic and cultural interactions with Greek colonies that dotted the Northern Black Sea Coast. They are also attested in Herodotus' *Histories* as the "Royal Scythians" (Herodotus 4.20), who constituted a warrior aristocracy ruling over Northern Pontus. The city state of Miletus pioneered colonization efforts in Northern Pontus, with their initial ventures culminating in the

establishment of Berezan⁵ and Olbia⁶ during the last quarter of the 7th century BCE (Tsetsckhladze, 2019: 12). Olbia was arguably the most important and prosperous colony in the region: more than 150 Hellenistic monuments and unfortified agricultural settlements which sustained the *emporium* have been found in the surrounding hinterland from the 5th Century BCE onwards (Bujskikh and Bujskikh, 2019; Bylkova, 2007). Later Hellenistic presence is evident from the colonies of Theodosia⁷ and Chersonesos⁸, established in the late 5th century (Petropoulos 2019: 194, Triester and Vinogradov 1993: 541). The Greeks propagandized their pantheon amongst the local population. Early coinage circulated at Olbia in the form of arrowheads was a particular votive in the cult of Apollo the Healer (Rusyayeva, 2007: 98); fragments of a marble statue of Apollo, and reliefs carved out of local limestone depicting Cybele (Triester and Vinogradov 1993: 536) also attest to Greek cultic activity in Pontic Scythia.

Inchoate exchange systems matured into fully fledged trading networks, with the first workshops from Olbia dating to 550-525 BCE (Leypunskaya, 2007: 122). Hellenistic material culture was commonplace in the monumental royal kurgans exclusively found in Pontic Scythia. Royal gravesites such as Solokha (420-375 BCE), Chertomlyk (4th cent. BCE), Kul Oba (4th cent. BCE) and Alexandropol (340-300 BCE) all contained amphora, kylikes, and kantharoi; which facilitated the transportation and consumption of Greek wine, as well as Hellenistic coinage (Alekseev et al. 2001; Polin & Daragan 2020). As a matter of course, extensive Greek intervention in the Black Sea enhanced knowledge of the Black Sea Scythians extensively. The same cannot be said about the Saka in the east.

⁵ Also known as Borysthenes after the Greek toponym for the Dnieper River (Solovyov 2019: 164).

⁶ Also Pontic Olbia or *Olbia Pontica*.

⁷ Milesian settlement, southeastern Crimea.

⁸ Near modern Sevastopol, established by colonists from Herkleia Pontica, a Megarian colony in Bithynia.



Fig. 6: The Siberian steppe along the Ak-Alakha river. (UNESCO 2008).

The eastern Scythian cultures, referred to as the “Sakā” on Darius’ Bisitun inscription, as well as others at Persepolis (Waghmar 2020), inhabited lands stretching from the Kazakh steppe towards Siberia and Mongolia (Taylor et al. 2020, Pankova 2017, Puri 1994). The Saka subgroup incorporates a much larger array of cultural phenomena across a much wider chronological scale, whilst also displaying a degree of linguistic diversity. Scholars have independently described the Tasmola culture (8th-5th centuries BCE) in Kazakhstan (Beisenov 2020), The Indo-Scythian kingdom in the Indus Valley, Punjab and Sakastan (1st century BCE-1st century CE) (Puri 1994) and the Kingdom of Khotan, which existed as late as the 10th century CE (Waghmar 2020) as “Saka”. The multivariate use of the term reflects differing imaginations of the Saka as a singular cultural group bound by related languages or ways of life, as a confederation of nomadic tribes,

or merely as a synonym of Scythia and the Scythians. In any case, it is within the larger landscape of eastern Scythia where the Pazyryk are situated.



Fig. 7: Location of Pazyryk and other Altaian sites (triangles) mentioned in this paper (adapted from Slyusarenko 2000:123)

The Pazyryk Kurgans

The kurgans that constitute the Pazyryk burial complex in the Altai were initially discovered in 1924 by Soviet archaeologist Sergei Rudenko, and later comprehensively excavated and documented as part of the 1947 expedition led by the USSR Academy of Sciences

and the State Hermitage Museum in Moscow (Rudenko 1970: xxxiii). They are concentrated within the eponymous Pazyryk valley on the southern foothills of the Chulyshman range, located in the east of the present day Altai Republic (see Fig. 7) (Rudenko 1970: 2). The Altai region is situated at the confluence of four modern day states: Russia to the north, Mongolia to the east, China to its south, and Kazakhstan to the west. Approximately 40 barrows of various sizes make up the burial site, all kurgans characteristic of the Eurasian steppe tradition, featuring flat stone pavements of circular and oval shapes and stone enclosures surrounding a mound constituted of earthen materials, topped with cairns (Rudenko 1970: 13).

Five large barrows were identified, labeled Pazyryk 1-5, with diameters ranging between 36-46m, surrounded additionally by low earthen mounds covered in stone (Ibid.). It is within these greater barrows where Rudenko unearthed the remains of 4 mummified individuals, bearing tattoos of the Pazyryk culture. The barrows shared common structural features and arrangements: the tomb shaft was oriented along the east-west axis, human burials occur in a log chamber towards the south side, accompanied by horse burials in the northern sector outside the main burial chamber; a prevalent feature of Scythian burials across the Eurasian steppe (Rudenko 1970: 14). The uniformity of material culture, as well as the geographical proximity of the barrows, led to the recognition of a locally defined Pazyryk cultural group, nested within the greater Scythian cultures of the steppe.



Fig. 8: *Excavations at Pazyryk barrow 5, with archaeologists' camp in the foreground (British museum).*



Fig. 9: General view of the Pazyryk site (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 1).

Chronology

Rudenko (1970) initially proposed a 5th century BCE date for the barrows, a *terminus post quem* supported by calibrated radiocarbon dates from Pazyryk 2 and 5 which suggested that the graves were completed no later than 400 BCE (Hiebert 1992: 121). This was corroborated by dendrochronological analyses of logs from Pazyryk 2, which produced a range of 408 to 374 BCE (Alekseev et al. 2001: 1099). Hajdas et al. (2004) presented new calibrated and wiggle matched ¹⁴C dates, accompanied by higher resolution dendrochronological results. The results suggest that the earliest greater Pazyryk kurgan was only constructed at the end of the 4th century BCE; and that the latest was only constructed around 250 BCE (Hajdas et al. 2004: 114). The revised chronology has become largely accepted with the acknowledgement that higher resolution and better calibrated dates could be obtained in the future.

Thus, the current chronological sequence of the mounds is as follows: Pazyryk 2 (300-282 BCE), Pazyryk 3 (299 BCE), Pazyryk 1 (295 BCE), Pazyryk 4 (294/264 BCE), Pazyryk 5 (250 BCE) (Francfort 2020; Hajdas et al. 2004; Pankova 2017). The four tattooed mummies at Pazyryk were therefore interred within a 50 year period, and very possibly coexisted in life. Furthermore this cements the utility of greater Pazyryk barrows as a reliable type site.

Tattoos at Pazyryk

Although the 1947 expedition successfully recovered the 4 individuals placed in mounds 2 and 5, only the man in Pazyryk 2 ostensibly bore markings on his skin. The skin of the three other mummified bodies were dark-brown and did not immediately reveal signs of ink, and were subsequently acquired by the State Hermitage in Moscow. The tattoos were rendered visible to the naked eye due to the blue ink constraint against the preserved skin within the barrows, but the preserved skin tissue became darkened once they were taken out of their graves (See Fig. 10) (Barkova & Pankova 2005: 48). The excellent state of preservation of both skeletal and soft



Fig. 10: *Mummified man from Pazyryk barrow 5 (Rudenko 1953: 329).*

tissue remains are quite unusual in the Altai as it lies beyond the latitudes that facilitated permafrost. Instead, local freak climatic conditions, as well as low lying position of the barrows themselves hastened the permanent refrigeration of both human and horse remains soon after they were interned, a process known as barrow congelation (Rudenko 1970: xxxiv). Barrow congelation also facilitated the preservation of otherwise organic and perishable material: namely textiles, wooden artifacts and beams, garments and horse riding equipment. The Pazyryk mummies were housed in the Hermitage for more than fifty years, during which they were photographed several times and subjected to X-ray examination; none revealing any traces of tattoos (Pankova 2017: 70). New investigations utilizing infrared photography eventually revealed that all four mummies, two from Pazyryk 2 and two from Pazyryk 5 were all tattooed to different extents (Barkova & Pankova 2005). To combat the decay of skin tissue and pigment, infrared reflexology was used to restore carbon based pigments, which are again rendered visible due to their absorption of near-infrared wavelengths, which would be fully reflected by plain skin (Pankova 2017: 70). Below are detailed descriptions of the artistic forms, motifs and styles in Pazyryk tattooing, described sequentially from the left to the right halves of the body, descending from the cranial to caudal aspect.

Pazyryk 2 (300-282 BCE)

Male “Chief”

The tattoos on the body of the man from Pazyryk 2 are the oldest amongst the Pazyryk group. The body was in a relatively poor state of preservation, particularly on the left side of the chest where the skin and muscle fibers had perished (Rudenko 1970: 110). Despite this, he is the most decorated of the four tattooed mummies from Pazyryk. Close examination reveals that the

individual was covered with tattoos on both his arms and shoulders, chest, lower back and lower leg on the right side, extending to his feet (Fig. 11) (Ibid.).

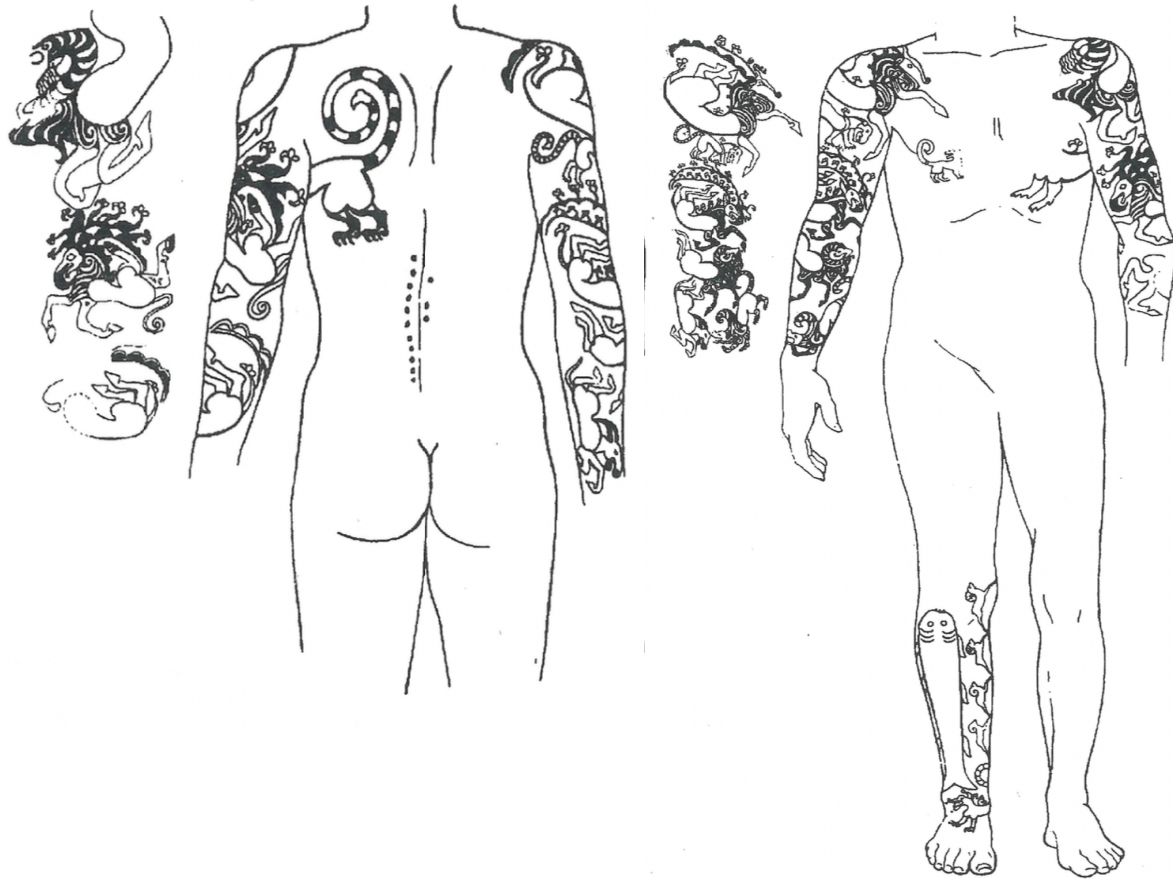


Fig. 11, left to right: tattoos on the back and front of the man in Pazyryk 2, with details of individual icons on the left and right arms respectively.

On the right shoulder there is a fantastical deer with its hind quarters reversed in animal style fashion, and its tail featuring a “bird head”. Its antlers are elaborately constructed, also featuring a row of “bird head” decorations above it. The mane of the creature is stylised geometrically, a feature seen in other representations of fantastical ungulates at Pazyryk. Below that is a small feline predator also bearing a curved and segmented tail, as well as the “bird head”

tine. The elaborate antlers decorated with “bird head” tines are one of many recurring motifs in Pazyryk tattoo art, all of which will be explored in greater detail below.

The right upper arm features a deer with an eagle’s beak, elaborately ornamented antlers where the tines and tail terminate in “bird heads” (Rudenko 1970: 111). The front limbs are stylised with lines and swirling geometric motifs, similar to the ram below it. It also features a segmented tail with a “bird head” tine and reversed hind quarters. Below the deer is a mountain ram with segmented horns, stylised front limbs and mane, in a similar manner to the deer above it (Ibid.).

The right forearm features two creatures drawn in parallel. On the medial aspect is a winged monster, jaws agape with a feature that resembles a comb or wing, with segmented tails. The front limbs are familiarly styled with geometric swirls. The lateral aspect features a donkey or onager with twisted cruppers, and sports a crest originating from the back of its head.

Tattoos also cover the lower part of the right leg below the knee (Rudenko 1970: 112). A fish runs along the shin from a top-down perspective where both lateral halves of the body are shown, it is the only aquatic animal that appears at Pazyryk, nor are there any chimeras consisting of piscine parts. Directly below that is a fanged feline predator with horns and “bird head” protrusions on its back. Several small dots are found below its mouth to the left, a motif also found on the lower back. On the inner shin next to the fish is a procession of 4 mountain goats (Rudenko 1970: 112). Animals depicted in a procession is a Pazyryk motif also seen on the tattoos of a man from Pazyryk 5.

The left side of the back features the posterior half of a fantastical creature with a curled and segmented tail, as well as felid hind paws and claws. Its body passes underneath the man’s

left arm, and its tail is placed over the left shoulder blade. The tines of the tail resemble a “bird’s head” (Rudenko 1970:110).

The left arm is less preserved than the right, and depicts three figures, two of which are incomplete. There is an ungulate on the left shoulder, where only its front quarters remain visible sans the head (Rudenko 1970: 111). From the remains, a segmented horn can be identified, suggesting that it is a mountain ram; as well as a styled mane and front quarters as seen from many figures on the right arm.

On the upper arm is another deer with an eagle’s beak roughly parallel in position with the similarly constructed deer on the right arm. Its hind quarters are followed with a curled tail, but it is not segmented. The antlers are elaborately decorated with “bird head” tines, and the mane is visibly decorated with curved geometric lines.

The lowest tattoo is situated on the forearm, only featuring the hind quarters of an ungulate, where the frontal aspect of the animal has not been preserved. But it can be inferred from the other representations, as well the ends of the antlers stylised with semicircles that it follows the general style of elaborate features. The extremity of the tail shows the same “bird’s head”.

Lastly, another deer with an eagle's beak and elaborate antlers appear on the left foot beneath the knee, discovered through infrared photography (Fig. 12) (Pankova 2017: 83). Its front quarters and comb are geometrically decorated in the typically Pazyryk manner as seen above (Ibid.). Curiously, there are some dotted markings on the lower back of the man, which are one of the few non-animalistic motifs present at Pazyryk. It is believed however that they mostly serve therapeutic or apotropaic functions rather than being treated as part of any extant compositions (Rudenko 1970).



Fig. 12: Fantastical deer with an eagle's beak on the left foot of the man from Pazyryk 2. Note the "bird head" tines on its antlers. (Pankova 2017: 85)

Woman

Kurgan 2 also contained the body of a woman, although her tattoos were not discovered until much later. Her body was placed in the coffin together with her male counterpart, but her skin was much less well preserved; and her forearm bore no trace of soft tissue (Pankova 2017: 73). Tattoos were observed at three locations (Fig. 13).



Figs. 13 and 14, left to right: 13: Tattoos on the woman from Pazyryk 2 (Pankova 2017:72). 14: Infrared image of the woman's left shoulder.

On the left shoulder was a beaked deer with elaborate antlers and twisted lower body, akin to the tattoos on her male counterpart (Fig. 14) (Ibid., 71). The antlers do not terminate with bird head tines, but appear to represent a miniature deer's head with curved antlers. There is a depiction of a mountain sheep with a twisted rump, with geometrically stylised front, hind legs and horns (Ibid., 72). The dorsal side of the left wrist depicts an antler with numerous prongs (Ibid.). Due to the poor state of preservation it is not known if it is an independent representation or part of a larger image of an ungulate.

Pazyryk 5 (250 BCE)

Man

The mummified remains from Pazyryk 5 were generally better preserved than those from Pazyryk 2, they are the latest of the five greater barrows and feature a similar configuration of a male-female pair buried together in a large coffin (Pankova 2017: 73). The man was tattooed on his shoulders, back, arms and legs (Fig. 15).

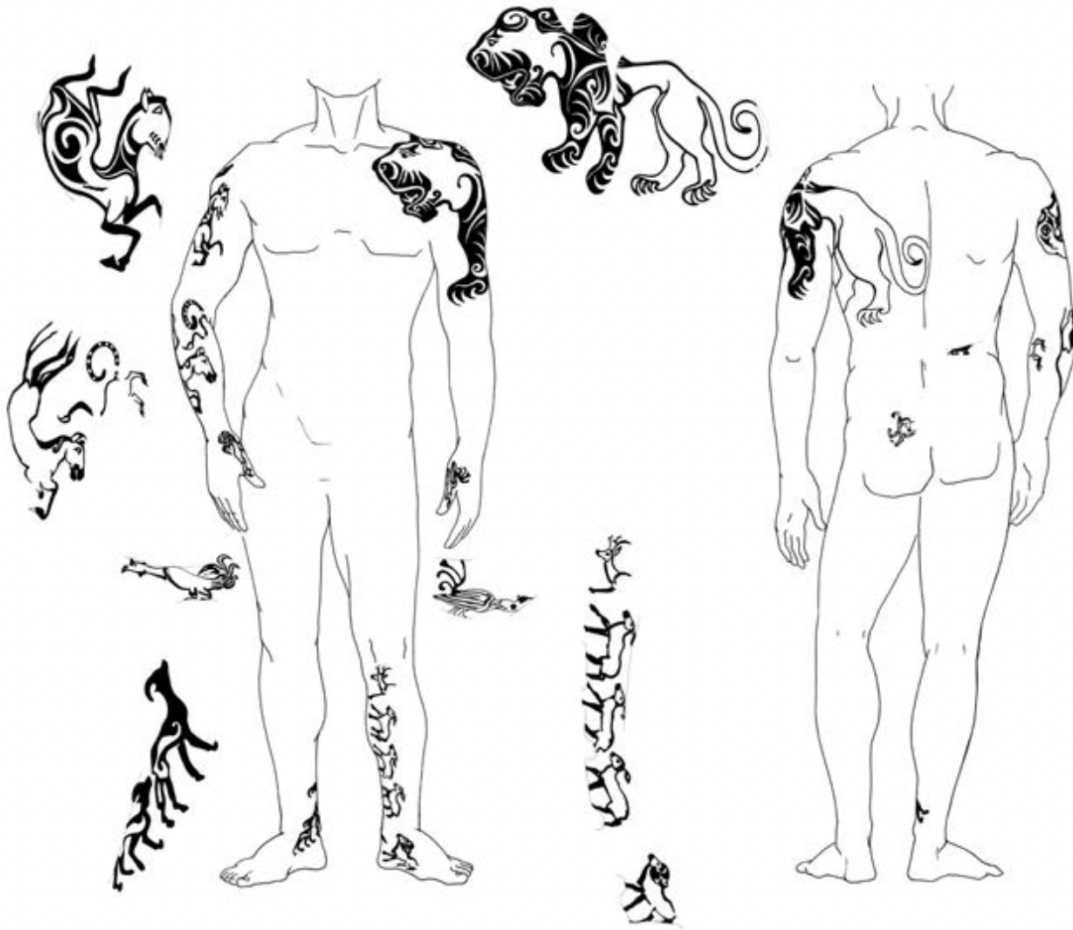


Fig. 15: Tattoos on the man from Pazyryk 5 (Pankova 2017: 73).

On the right upper arm there is a horse with twisted hindquarters, and geometrically decorated body, both typical representations. The right forearm features a complete equid faced with a predator with a segmented tail, the latter of which only the hind quarters were preserved (Ibid.). It is framed in a similar manner as the depiction of a field and horse on the man from Pazyryk 2.

The right ankle features two ungulates seemingly walking upwards in a procession, similar to the left leg (Fig. 17). As mentioned above, the motif of animals in a procession is mirrored in Pazyryk 2.

The most prominent creature is a large feline predator whose head and front limb can be seen on the left chest, where the lower body and tail extend to the upper back below the scapula. Its front limbs and mane are decorated geometrically, with the characteristic curled tail found. Both are typical pazyryk motifs as mentioned above.

The left leg features four argali in a procession upwards beginning from the ankle and ending just below the knee (Fig. 16) (Ibid.). Above the argali there is the head of a deer shown in profile, but facing the right leg and not upwards: it remains difficult to determine if this creature is part of the composition of the argali given their proximity.



Figs. 16 and 17: The “animal procession” composition. Left to right: 16: four argali in a procession upwards beginning from the left ankle. 17: two ungulates depicted on the right ankle. (Pankova 2017: 77-78).

Woman

The tattoos on the woman from Pazyryk 5 consists of slightly different iconography with regards to style and composition (Pankova 2005: 56). Notably it lacks the fantastical creatures found on the bodies of the previous three mummies, but displays classic Scythian animal style predation scenes. The tattoos are concentrated on the left and right arms.

The left arm features a scene where a large predatory bird with a “bird head” tines claws at the neck of a deer or elk (Ibid., 79). The head of the ungulate has not been preserved, and its body bears no geometric motifs at all.

Depicted on the right forearm is a scene of a tiger and leopard attacking a deer or an elk, and a second tiger attacking the other ungulate of similar form above that (Fig. 18). Besides the floral motifs, the predation scene on the right forearm appears also to be rooted in art outside of the Altai. The style in which the tiger’s fur is rendered, where curved lines are used to depict both patterns of the skin and the texture of the fur, is most similar to that on double golden plaques depicting predation scenes from the Ordos⁹ (Barkova & Pankova 2005:57). The leopard on the other hand is characterized by a combination of the front quarters depicted en face, and an accentuated spine. This manner of representation is not known in Pazyryk art, and instead finds parallels in a fragment of a ceramic relief from Northern China dated to the 3rd century BCE (Ibid.). This scene from the woman in Pazyryk 5 is the only of the group that displays clear foreign artistic influence, yet the animals are incorporated into the classic Scythian animal style predation composition. Below is an overview and analysis of the artistic forms found in the tattoos that clearly constitute a clear Pazyryk style.

⁹ Modern Inner Mongolia.

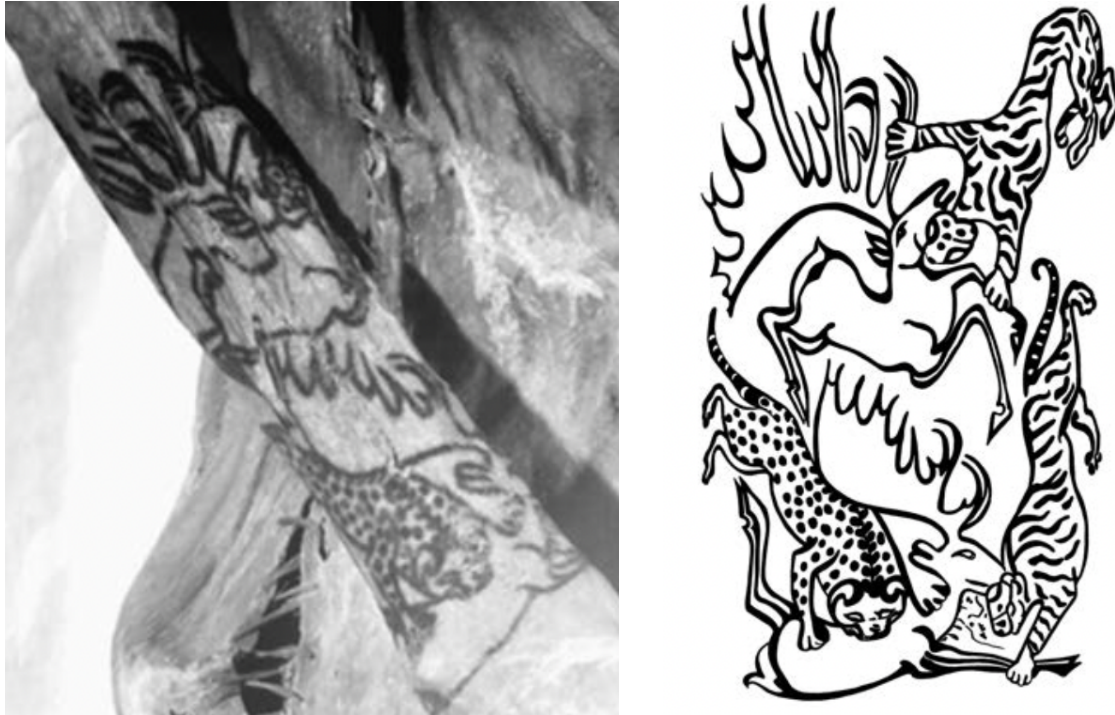


Fig. 18: Predation scene on the forearm of the woman from Pazyryk 5 (Pankova 2017: 80-81).

Analysis

From the descriptions above one can observe that Pazyryk tattoo art follows defined local conventions. Although many of the creatures are fantastical in nature, inspiration is clearly drawn from animals native to the Eurasian steppes and Central Asia. The most commonly referenced fauna include the Caspian Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus maral*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), mountain sheep/argali (*Ovis ammon*), the extinct Caspian Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) and the white tailed (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) and golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*).

There are no significant differences in how the tattoos are positioned, or in the selection of specific animals when comparing across biological sex and the different burials at a site level besides the woman in Pazyryk 5; which is an aforementioned outlier. Symmetry is most apparent

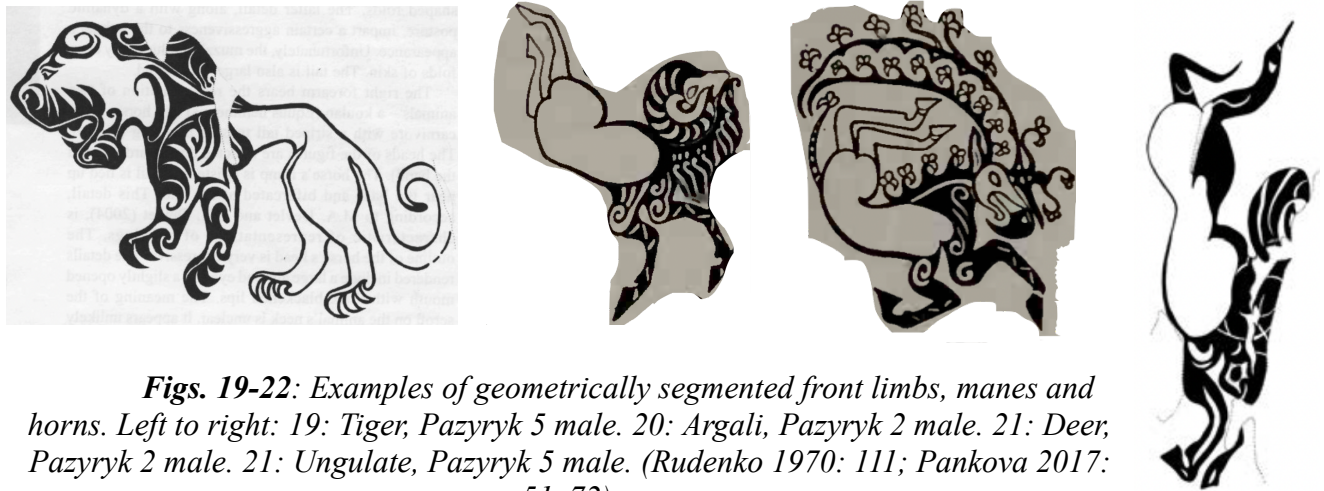
on the man from Pazyryk 2, where the two deer chimeras lie in parallel on the upper arms and shoulders. Despite this, neither positional nor artistic symmetry play a significant role in the overall composition of Pazyryk tattoo art, and seem to represent idiosyncratic artistic choices. Whether the subject represented is a carnivore or herbivore, i.e. predator or prey plays little to no part in determining the incorporation of certain motifs, such as segmented and curled tails; contrary to what Rudenko (1970) had suggested.

The most surprising observation regards the small number of explicit scenes of predation, well documented on artifacts at Pazyryk, and ubiquitous in Scythian animal style art. Scenes of predation only occur on the forearms of the men from Pazyryk barrows 2 and 5. This does not mean that animal style compositions are absent however, as the representation of animals with twisted or contorted body parts remained popular at Pazyryk. The contortion of body parts is expressly popular in Scythian Siberia, where parallels could be found in the Siberian Collection of Peter the Great, containing an assortment of gold artifacts dated to between the 4th and 1st centuries BCE (Kisel 2020; Korolkova 2020). At Pazyryk, this technique is employed solely on the hind quarters and limbs of the animal, occasionally the tail.

This representation may therefore be considered a hallmark of Siberian animalistic art, where the visual culture from Pazyryk indicates an established local style.

Pazyryk artists also made extensive use of contrast as a method of stylisation, particularly efficacious considering the methodological limitations of tattoo application, where color is less of a prominent artistic tool than the simple differentiation between dark ink and light coloured skin. Geometric motifs, such as wiggly lines, bean-like shapes and otherwise polygons curved in a variety of manners are used to populate the space within the images. They are utilized in the plethora of combs and manes found in both ungulates and feline predators, such as those on the

argali and deer on the arms and shoulders of the man and woman from Pazyryk 2 and the comb or wing feature on the feline predator from the lower arm of the same man from kurgan 2. Swirls and pill-like shapes are prevalent geometric motifs which decorate on the front and hind limbs of many creatures: aforementioned examples include the winged feline, argali and fantastical deer on the pair from Pazyryk 2 and the large representation of a feline predator on the left shoulder and back on the man entombed in Pazyryk 5 (Fig. 19-22). The argali on the right arm of the woman from Pazyryk 2 is the only example of both limbs being geometrically decorated, in each of the other creatures only the front limbs received this treatment.



Figs. 19-22: Examples of geometrically segmented front limbs, manes and horns. Left to right: 19: Tiger, Pazyryk 5 male. 20: Argali, Pazyryk 2 male. 21: Deer, Pazyryk 2 male. 21: Ungulate, Pazyryk 5 male. (Rudenko 1970: 111; Pankova 2017: 51, 72).

Segmented tails, horns, antlers and bodies represent another manifestation of implementing contrast as a tool for emphasis of features. The horse on the right upper arm and the two ungulates on the right ankle of the man in Pazyryk 5 both contain curves and swirls which emphasize their mid sections. Segmented horns appear on every mountain sheep depicted, and segmented tails are equally as pervasive, although the curvature of the tail seems to be another arbitrary artistic choice, not necessarily related to the use of alternating segments.

Another pervading motif is the exaggerated antlers, usually decorated with “bird head” tines, which occur at the ends of tails, antlers, and sometimes the body of the creature (Fig.

23-25). The bird head is used especially on the antlers of the fantastical deer on the man buried in Pazyryk 2, and the tails of both predatory felines and ungulates. The “bird head” is one of a few ways the Pazyryk decorated exaggerated antlers (Rudenko 1970).



***Figs. 23-25:** Examples of elaborate antlers and “bird head” tines. Left to right: 23: feline with “bird head protrusion on its back, Pazyryk 2 male. 24: Deer with “bird head” antlers, Pazyryk 2 male. 25: deer with elaborate antlers. (Rudenko 1970: 111; Pankova 2017: 72).*

Lastly, the composition which frames multiple animals in a procession facing the same direction in profile is seen repeatedly on the man from Pazyryk 5, where four argali traverse the left inner shin and two horned ungulates appear on the right ankle (see Fig. 18). The man entombed in Pazyryk 2 similarly has four mountain sheep lined up on his right inner shin, suggesting that this compositional style enjoyed some degree of popularity. These scenes, together with the two depictions of predation are the only iconography where multiple animals are involved. There are still unsolved questions as to whether these tattoos are intended to be individual entities showing different animals, or if they make up a larger complete scene.

All in all, one can observe a thriving local tradition within Pazyryk tattoo art, that makes use of motifs such as “bird head” tines, geometrically decorated and segmented body parts, whilst featuring local animals rendered in typical animal style fashion. In the next section, Achaemenid art at Pazyryk will be examined in a comparative manner with the motifs and themes

described in Pazyryk tattooing, with a particular focus in non figural and figural compositions such as the lotus and the Achaemenid griffin.

Achaemenid Art at Pazyryk: A Comparative Study

The selected motifs are referenced from extant scholarship, which is overtly biased towards the Near East, and facilitates discussion which reflects how a study of Pazyryk art cannot solely rely on Achaemenid Persian parallels. The examined sample includes items such as garments and horse saddlery, objects that serve both a utilitarian and aesthetic function; validating the methodological approach of the separation of material and bodily artistic mediums. Through thorough comparisons with Achaemenid Persian art on material objects, it is possible to conclude that Pazyryk tattoo art is reserved as a medium with great socio-cultural significance void of clear Achaemenid influences.

Origins and Processes of Transmission

The most prominent foreign artistic influence at Pazyryk has its roots in Achaemenid Persia, where a significant portion of material culture displays motifs and styles able to be traced eastwards. The period which shows the greatest Achaemenid influence in the art of Central Asia and the eastern steppes occurs after the fall of its empire, following the military campaigns of Alexander of Macedon during the 330s BCE to his death in 323 BCE (Erskine 2002; Francfort 2020). In the Scythian Altai, Achaemenid influences are only faintly detected around the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, and become readily visible at the turn of the 3rd century, where intensified

links between the steppe and Greco-Persia coincided with the establishment of various Hellenistic regimes in Central Asia, namely the Seleucids, Greco-Bactrians and Indo-Greeks.

The dissemination of Achaemenid artistic styles eastward to Siberia remains an enigmatic and poorly understood process. Francfort (2020: 152) proposes the notion of the “steppe road”, tracing the importation and imitation of Achaemenid art to kurgan complexes from the Southern Urals and Kazakhstan. One such example comes from Taksai-1, kurgan 6 (late 6th-early 5th century BCE), situated in the Southern Urals, close the western border between Kazakhstan and Russia, where a wooden comb featuring a battle scene carved in relief was found (Summerer and Lukpanova 2020). Three individuals were depicted, including a chariot driver accompanied by an archer confronting a foot soldier equipped with a gorytos, a bow case used by the Scythians which doubles as a quiver (Loades 2020; Summerer and Lukpanova 2020: 594). This depiction follows the conventions of Achaemenid glyptic art as seen at Persepolis; the charioteer is donned in typical Persian attire, specifically his crown and Kandys, a Median cloak with empty sleeves (Summerer and Lukpanova 2020: 594). Other characteristics however demonstrate that this item was an imitation instead of an import: Achaemenid monumental art rarely depicted warfare imagery, whereas glyptics tend to favor depictions of infantry and omit chariots (Ibid.). The relaxed posture of the horse also contradicts Achaemenid hunting iconography, where they are often depicted in a galloping manner (Ibid.). Taksai-1 is an early destination of Achaemenid artistic influence, and together with other early steppe sites served as intermediaries that spread Near Eastern art further east.

Persian Art at Pazyryk

The material assemblage at Pazyryk reflects processes of experimentation where Persian and steppe themes are combined and recreated. The following discussion will focus on prominent non figural compositional patterns namely the palmette, lotus bud, the “dots and commas” (Rubinson 1990; Rudenko 1970) motif, as well as the popular figural motif of the Achaemenid griffin. There is a much higher acceptance of Achaemenid artistic influence and experimentation in material objects at Pazyryk compared to tattoos, where both figural and non figural motifs enjoyed popularity. However these elements were also consciously and systematically reworked locally, underlined by extant Pazyryk artistic conventions.

Non Figural Elements

Palmettes and Lotus buds are both motifs typical of Achaemenid and Greco-Persian art. They are used frequently by Pazyryk artists and manifest in various forms and combinations, namely the number of fronds or petals present and their sizes. They are found in monumental reliefs and artifacts from Persepolis, and Susa (Fig. 26) (Francfort 2020; Rudenko 1970). Achaemenid lotus flowers are rooted in Neo Assyrian prototypes, and are especially prominent on Pazyryk textiles.

Lotus buds appear on the sleeve of the woman’s upper garment, and a cut out decoration on the soles of a woman’s bootee from kurgan 2 (Rudenko 1970: 91). Further instances include an applied leather decoration on a woman’s dress, and an ornament on a leather flask pouch, both also from Pazyryk 2 (Ibid.). A palmette flanked by lotus petals also decorate the borders of a felt carpet from barrow 2 (Fig. 28), and the famous large felt carpet or wall hanging from barrow 5

which imitates a typical Achaemenid court scene (Rudenko 1970; Francfort 2020: 142). Palmettes decorate bridles from Pazyryk mounds 1, 2 and 5 (Fig. 27) (Francfort 2020: 139).



Figs. 26-28: Palmettes and lotus motifs. Top left, 26: Achaemenid glazed brick with palmette from the palace complex at Susa (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Online Collection*¹⁰). Top right, 27: Horse chest strap decorated with palmettes from Pazyryk 1 (Francfort 2020: 139). Bottom, 28: Border of a felt carpet decorated with palmettes and lotus buds from Pazyryk 2 (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 148b).

The dots and commas motif originated in the Ancient Near East as a way of contouring features of the body, such as skeletal structure and musculature in animals (Fig. 29) (Rubinson 1990). Achaemenid representations usually employ more elaborate shapes and utilize different

¹⁰ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/324036>

shades of color to emphasize musculature (Fig. 29), adapted by the Pazyryk and simplified into dots and commas. They are found in sculptures and reliefs from Urartu, Neo Assyria, and at the Achaemenid palace complex at Susa (Rudenko 1970: 272). Examples from Pazyryk include applied decorations on saddle covers from Pazyryk 1 and 2 (Fig. 30) (Rudenko 1970: pl. 168-170), where griffins, fantastical deer and horned lions are decorated with dots and commas in individual and predatory scenes.

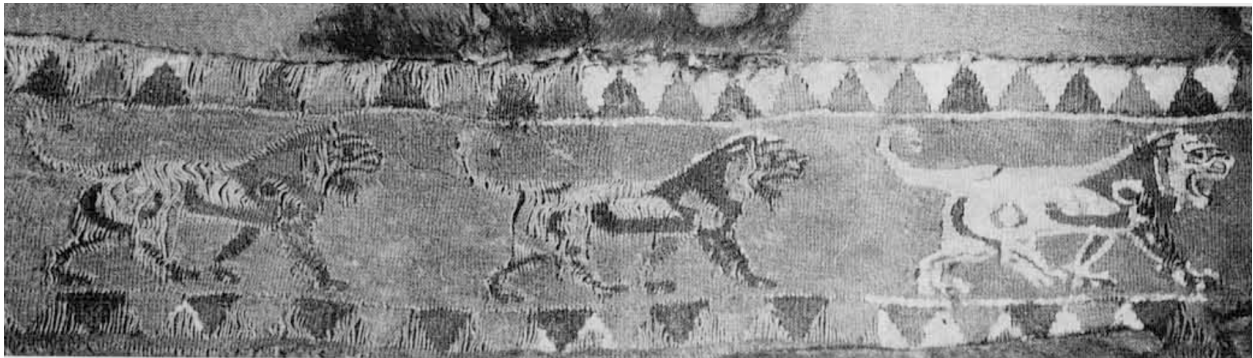


Fig. 29: Achaemenid textile showing lions with defined musculature (Rubinson 55).

In barrow 1, two additional saddle covers also feature animals sporting these decorations: a blue saddle cover showing a tiger falling upon the elk in typical Scythian animal style features the motif on the body of the elk (Rudenko 1970: 230-233). An elk is represented on white saddle-cover from barrow 2, with multicolored thin felt and stitched onto the cover. Its torso is decorated with dots and commas (Fig. 31) (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 168a). Further examples include a stamped copper ornament covered in gold leaf, featuring confronted rams decorated with both dots and commas, as well as icons shaped like water droplets (Rudenko 1970: 103), a local innovation. Applied decorations on the end of a belt from barrow 2 also utilize these symbols, but in a geometric fashion rather than in zoomorphic iconography.



Fig. 30: Illustration of decoration on a saddle cover from Pazyryk 1. The ram sports the dots and commas on its torso (Rudenko 1970: 233)



Fig. 31: Elk on a white saddle cover decorated with dots and commas from Pazyryk 2 (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 168a).

Despite their presence of a plethora of objects, none of these Achaemenid non figural ornaments appear in any of the tattoos from Pazyryk, suggesting that imitation and open experimentation with Near Eastern motifs was restricted to material objects. Tattoo art constitutes a more intimate cultural space, where the selection of motifs and convention draws

more from localized steppe art, and are much more recognisable within Pazyryk artistic frameworks.

Figural Elements

Achaemenid figural elements at Pazyryk further highlight the pervasiveness of Persian artistic influence, but are themselves again subject to experimentation and reimagination by Pazyryk artists. By far the most common Achaemenid figural motifs at Pazyryk are the closely related griffin and horned lion. Lions were not native to Central Asia during this period, and their omnipresence in Achaemenid art allows for the tracing of how these motifs were transferred. In Persia, lions, horned or otherwise, could be seen on a relief depicting a predation scene at Persepolis (Francfort 2020), on a stone relief where a horned lion is slain by the “royal hero”, sculpted in the round in stone, and in profile on the reliefs outside Darius I’s tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 32) (Schmidt 1970).

The horned and winged lions, which do not bear the eagle's beak, is the most common griffin derivative found at Pazyryk. One example is an applied felt on a saddle cover from Pazyryk 1 (Fig. 33). The lion is depicted leaping towards an argali in typical animal style fashion, their bodies bearing the dots and commas found in Near Eastern art (Rudenko 1970). Stamped copper ornaments and a neck torque from Pazyryk 2 also feature horned and winged lions without the eagle’s beak (Rudenko 1970:102). These lions do have horns terminating with small knobs, similar to Achaemenid Persian representations of horned lions and griffins (Ibid.).

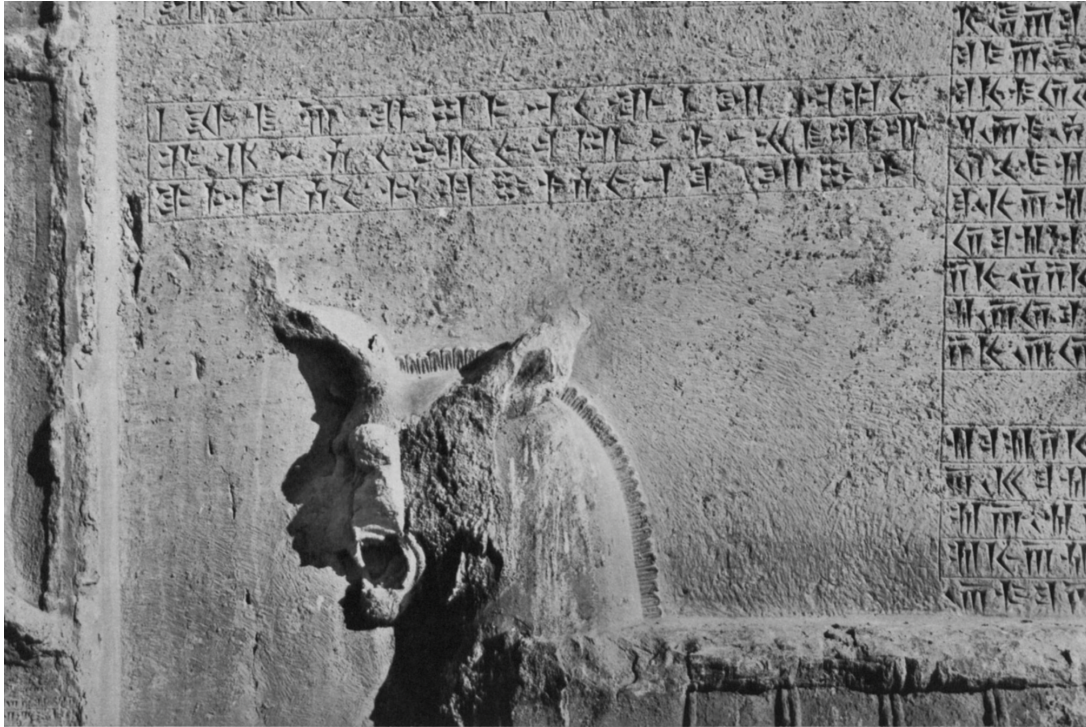


Fig. 32: Horned lion in relief at Darius I's tomb, Naqsh-i Rostam (Schmidt 1970: Pl. 32).



Fig. 33: Applied felt decoration from Pazyryk 1: horned lion falling upon a ram, animal style composition (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 169a)

Horse headdresses from Pazyryk 1 features crests in the form of the heads of horned lions (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 120); a copper pendant, wooden carving and leather saddle cover from Pazyryk 2 also make use of the horned and winged lion (Rudenko 1970). Horse headdresses are a staple in the graves of the Pazyryk and closely related cultures, such as at the Bashadar and Tuekta burial complexes (Ochir-Goryaeva 2020); and are often elaborately ornamented and stylised. The lion-griffin on the horse headdress at Pazyryk suggests that whilst this foreign figure was deemed worthy of decorating important pieces of equipment, it is done so in a calculated manner, and is most likely supplementary in nature.

The Achaemenid griffin on the other hand sports a brush-like mane, leaf shaped ears, beak agape and eyes protruding (Francfort 2020:144). A well known depiction from Persepolis features addorsed griffin protomes on a stone column capital (Fig. 34). It can be traced further back to Mesopotamia, namely the Neo Assyrians, but its distinctive Achaemenid form is the most well known. Prior to reaching Pazyryk, it has been found in Central Asia at sites such as Kalaly-Gyr in Chorasmia, a palace thought to have housed an Achaemenid satrap (Ibid.).

Immediately however it is important to note that direct representations of the Persepolitan griffin, featuring the body of a lion and the beaks of an eagle are few and far between at Pazyryk. Even griffins that abide by the Achaemenid formula are clearly stylised in a characteristically Pazyryk manner in animal style predation scenes. More common are lion-griffins, which are complete lions depicted with wings that are also sometimes horned; as well as eagle griffins, combinations that feature otherwise complete animals with an eagle's beak. It is commonplace to refer to the plethora of fantastical ungulate and feline chimeras as “horse griffins”, “hoofed griffins” (Pankova 2017; Shulga 2010) or lion and eagle griffins (Rudenko 1970: 110). These labels however are not tenable, and reflect a Near Eastern-centric approach to understanding

Pazyryk art, due to these chimeras being so far removed from the Achaemenid griffin. It is even more striking that these chimeras do not bear a clear mosaic of traits like the usual griffin, Pazyryk griffins often only contain one truly discernible animal. But for the sake of uniformity with extant sources, terms such as lion and eagle griffins will be used occasionally. Lion griffins are referred to as winged or horned lions, whilst other chimeras will be described descriptively.

Direct imitations of the Achaemenid griffin appear on an applied decoration on a saddle cover from Pazyryk 1 features two struggling griffins (Fig. 35) (Rudenko 1970:236): on the left is a classic Persepolitan griffin with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion, albeit its claws and curving crest are rendered in a Pazyryk fashion. On the right is a Pazyryk lion-griffin, a horned and winged lion with its head twisted in accordance with Scythian animal style. Another true griffin appears on an aforementioned applied felt decoration from Pazyryk 1, where it is framed within an animal style predator scene hunting a mountain goat, whose hind quarters and head are twisted (Rudenko 1970: 230). Another example comes from a saddle cover from barrow 1 where a griffin falls upon a mountain ram (Fig. 36) (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 170). These are the few depictions of a proper griffin at Pazyryk, and even so is rendered in a fashion so far removed from Achaemenid stylistic conventions especially in its framing and composition. Another local innovation is the exaggerated crest. The characteristic crest of Achaemenid griffins is usually quite trimmed, but this depiction exaggerates both the extent and scale of the crest, again a local motif. Rudenko (1970: 257) states that even the griffins that most closely resemble their Achaemenid cousins may not contain the body of a lion, but instead combine the eagle's head with tigers and leopards.



Figs. 34 and 35: Top, 34: Griffins atop stone column at Persepolis (Francfort 2020: 144). Bottom, 35: Illustration of griffin (left) on a felt decoration on a saddle cover, Pazyryk I (Rudenko: 1970: 236). Note the tall crest on the Pazyryk griffin, on the left side of the bottom figure. Achaemenid griffins tend to have short manes, experimented with by Pazyryk artists. Also note that the “lion-griffin” on the right lacks the features of a raptor.





Fig. 36: Griffin falling upon mountain ram, saddle cover decoration from Pazyryk 1 (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 170). Note the tall crest.

Further evidence for conscious experimentation can be found in the plethora of griffin-esque creatures, and different compositional combinations which bear little to no resemblance to the classic Achaemenid griffin.

Griffins with large ears and other exaggerated features are attested at Pazyryk. For example, in kurgan 1 there is a griffin with big ears and extended wings with distended tail is depicted falling on an elk on a saddle cover (Rudenko 1970: 235). Although its wings and ears resemble the griffin, it is in fact merely an eagle with exaggerated features and stance in a typical animal style predation scene. Another eagle-griffin with oversized ears appears in the round on a wooden sculpture from kurgan 2 (Fig. 37) (Rudenko 1970: pl. 137a, b). Another predation scene

on a leather flask from kurgan 2 features an eagle with griffin-like traits, namely the exaggerated tail, crest and wings locked in a struggle with another griffin.

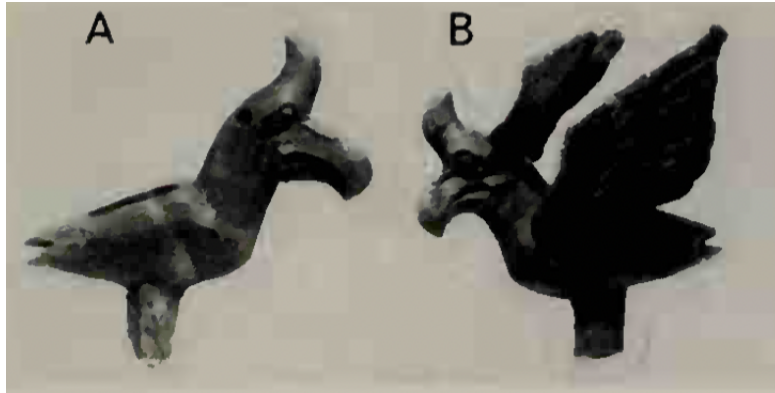
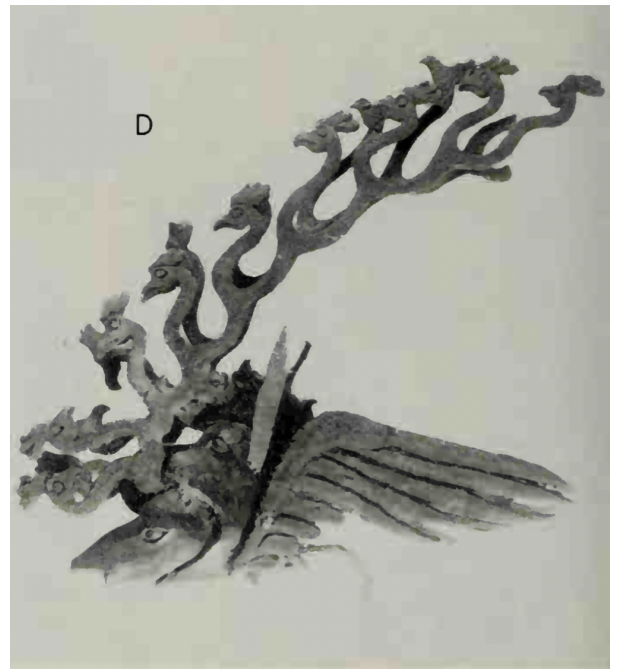


Fig. 37: long eared eagle-griffin, wooden sculpture, Pazyryk 2 (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 137a, b).

Kurgan 2 produced two artifacts with a distinctive composition: terminals featuring the heads of lion griffins with the heads of deer in their jaws, both orientated towards the same direction (Rudenko 1970: 258). The first of these is a finial or rest at the head end of the coffin in kurgan 2 (Fig. 38). A comb runs down its neck, predations scenes depicting the griffin hunting a goose decorates the sides of the base of the sculpture. The second of these is also a finial attachment: it has a very short neck and a deer's head in its beak (Fig. 39) (Rudenko 1970). This creature has elaborate antlers terminating with tines shaped like the head of a rooster, adding to the repertoire of Achaemenid griffin-inspired Pazyryk art. Although prevalent at Pazyryk, Achaemenid motifs such as the griffin nonetheless have been actively reimagined and reconstituted by Pazyryk artists before appearing on objects within a characteristic artistic framework developed on the steppe.



Figs. 38 and 39: Left, 38: Finial from coffin in kurgan 2 (Kisel 2020: 212). Right, 39: Finial, kurgan 2 (Rudenko 1970: Pl. 142d).

Discussion

Whilst the material objects at Pazyryk demonstrate clear Achaemenid Persian artistic influences, they differ artistically from Pazyryk tattoos, which demonstrate a much more localized steppe artistic tradition. Through comparing the presence, or lack thereof, of specific figural and non figural motifs, one can observe a clear demarcation of Pazyryk tattooing from the decoration of objects. There are no representations of Achaemenid griffins or horned lions in the tattoo repertoire, reflecting the stylistic decisions made by Pazyryk artisans and tattoo artists on what to include and exclude. Even within the material assemblage, the griffins and horned lions only exist within Pazyryk art after experimentation and adaptation within the local steppe

stylistic conventions, which allows for the constant but controlled incorporation of new elements. This is evidenced in the presence of the long eared griffins, as well as the finials where a deer's head is placed within the jaws of griffins. It is interesting to note that even though the griffin's comb is a feature prevalent in Achaemenid Persian art, they are usually short and trimmed compared to the elaborate depictions at Pazyryk (Rudenko 1970: 261). The fantastical deer tattoos on the man from Pazyryk that bore an eagle's beak may be an experimental form of the Achaemenid griffin. But the fact that the animals were rendered in animal style fashion, that only the eagle's beak was used and not the entire head, as well as the presence of local eagle species in Siberia suggests that this iconography is a Pazyryk invention. Achaemenid non figural elements such as the commas and half horseshoes appear on other mediums containing animalistic art at Pazyryk, but are completely absent on tattoos. The prevalent lotus motif, which decorated a plethora of textiles, is also absent on the bodies of the individuals.

The phenomenon at Pazyryk attests to how a Near Eastern-centric approach to Pazyryk art is quite simplistic, and fails to holistically capture the intricacies of the well established local artistic tradition. This approach is especially ineffective in the study of Pazyryk tattoo art, where there are few traces of foreign motifs. Instead one should study the subject with reference to the existing corpus of visual culture, and not to look towards the Near East for answers. This bias leads to the impression that Pazyryk visual culture is directly inherited from the Near East, without any consideration for investigating the subject from the steppe. This Pazyryk-centric perspective also counteracts the entrenched theoretical positions which undermine nomadic cultural agency; which was evidenced by the selective incorporation of foreign artistic forms in local mediums of cultural significance.

The lack of emic sources unfortunately means that the social significance and cultural idiosyncrasies of both the practice of tattooing and the resulting visual forms currently elude us. Based on the fact that tattooed mummies were only found in the largest of the Pazyryk mounds, it can be assumed that at least within this population tattoos carried a certain amount of prestige and status, or that it was an opportunity given to those who had already attained said positions. These markings could therefore function partly as a signifier of membership: the unity of designs can signify affiliations to particular ruling clans, families or ritualistic institutions, or merely as a commonplace practice for the purposes of fashion (Pankova 2017; Polosmak 2000). Various conjectures have been made as to the symbolic meaning and function of Pazyryk tattoos, surrounding the notion that art and iconography carry the the same interpretive and communicative importance in a society where no evidence for a written language has been found (Cheremisin 2007, 2009; Iwe 2013; Rudenko 1970). Cheremisin (2007, 2009) for example, puts forward a semiotic framework which seeks to analyze tattoo iconography through both content and methodology, tied to Altaian mythological traditions both through classical sources and ethnoarchaeology. In any case one may conclude the practice of tattooing and a strong local art style may be grounded in Pazyryk religious or political ideology, and reflects a coherent visual vocabulary used by the Pazyryk to express their identity.

Conclusions

In closing, tattoo art at Pazyryk proves the existence of a strong local artistic tradition which drew upon Scythian animal style, reflected in how animals are depicted both individually and in predation scenes. Even though Near Eastern influences are detectable on art which

decorated material objects, but never in a vacuum. There is a clear process of selection, deconstruction and recomposition of motifs which reflect conscious choices made by Pazyryk artisans, reflecting human intentionality in the active creation and recreation of Pazyryk visual culture. Local Pazyryk compositions and styles dominate the more intimate artistic domains of body markings, whereas Achaemenid art enjoys popularity on material objects, whilst nonetheless being heavily reinterpreted within Pazyryk cultural ideologies. Furthermore, this project strongly argues that a study of Pazyryk culture across different mediums and domains cannot be conducted through the lens of the Near East alone, where biases in scholarship and research lead to the diminishing of cultural agency. Whilst the study of the process and events that allowed for cultural transmission across Eurasia has value in understanding a portion of Scythian culture in the eastern steppes, a Pazyryk-centric approach is essential in a faithful retelling of the Pazyryk story. Further research and archaeological finds may shed light on the function and meanings of Pazyryk iconography: their social importance, uses in ritualistic and otherwise esoteric contexts, and how they would have been perceived by other Pazyryk nomads with differing socio-economic or socio-cultural affiliations. Tattoos may also reveal the mysterious relationships between culturally tied nomadic groups in the Altai, namely how the burials on the Ukok Plateau relate to the Pazyryk group, and whether these burials constitute a single or multiple diverse cultural units nested within the Scythian world.

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