

# OUR SCYTHIAN ANCESTORS

By

*W. Edmund Filmer B.A.*

WITHIN half a century of the House of Israel going into exile, the Scythians were mentioned for the first time in any historical document. These documents, which date from the reign of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (681-669 B.C.), were recovered from the archives of Nineveh and are now in the British Museum. They reveal that the Scythians were then located among the Medes where the Bible tells us that some of the Israelites had been placed in captivity (2 Kings 18: 11). The same documents also prove that another new people called Gimiri were also located in the same area at that time. Unless we are to suppose that three distinctly different peoples arrived in that area within the space of fifty years, we may conclude that all three were actually the same people under different names.

Now the name for Scythian in the Assyrian language was Iskuza, but there has been no explanation for the initial 'I' unless it be that the name was derived from 'Isaaca'. The Israelites may well have called themselves Isaaca, or house of Isaac, Amos did so a few years earlier (Amos 7:16). It should be realized that in Hebrew the accent falls on the last syllable, so that Isaac would not be pronounced as it is in English. Consequently, the 'I' could easily get lost altogether to form the Greek name *Skuthae*.

Herodotus (VI 1, 64) informs us that the Persians called all Scythians Sacae, and in every trilingual Persian inscription that mentions the Sacae (Saka), namely, that on the Behistun Rock, another on a gold plate, and a third in the tomb of Darius, the name is always translated Gimri in the Babylonian version. Since it is well known that the Assyrians used to call Israel Khumri, this could well be the origin of the later form Gimiri. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to believe that the Iskuzi and the Gimiri were both, in fact, Israelite exiles.

## Prayers to the Sun-God

The documents that first mention the Scythians belong to a series of cuneiform tablets classified as politico-religious texts. They include enquiries made by Esarhaddon of Shamash, the sun-god, through his priests, concerning the movement of troops, in particular those sent into Media to collect tribute. From these enquiries we learn that the people with whom they had to contend were not only the indigenous Medes but also the Gimiri and the Iskuzi or Scythians.

In one of these enquiries King Esarhaddon asks, 'Regarding Partatua, King of the Iskuza who has just sent his ambassador to Esarhaddon, King of Assyria, about a princess I ask you Shamash, great lord, if Esarhaddon gives a princess to Partatua King of the Iskuza for a wife, whether Partatua will observe and keep his oath to Esarhaddon, King of Assyria?' (translated from *Politische-religiose Texte*, p.30, by E.G. Klaube). As we shall see, there are grounds for believing not only that the marriage took place, but also that a military alliance between the Scythians and Assyrians was made, for Herodotus relates that on one occasion a Scythian army under the command of 'Madyes son of Protothyes' (Partatua) came to the relief of Nineveh. 'A battle was fought' he says, 'in which the Medes were defeated, and lost their power in Asia, which was taken over in its entirety by the Scythians' (1, 103, 104).

Now the Medes, and their northern neighbours, the Mannai, who dwelt around the shores of Lake Urmia, were renowned for their knowledge of riding horses. The Scythians evidently learned the art from them, and in consequence of their alliance with the Assyrians, were free to ride far and wide. In fact, Herodotus says that for twenty-eight years 'they behaved like robbers, riding up and down the country and seizing people's property. At last Cyaxares and the Medes invited the greater number of them to a banquet at which they made them drunk and murdered them, and in this way recovered their former power and dominion' (1, 106).

### **The Ziwiyé Treasure**

As a result of the hostility between Scythians and Medes, the two peoples would tend to separate and occupy different territory. This has been confirmed by the discovery in northern Iran of what was evidently the main Scythian stronghold on the summit of a hill in Mannai territory near the village of Ziwiyé, twenty-five miles east of Sakkiz. Attention was first drawn to the site when the local peasants unearthed a magnificent treasure, consisting of many pieces of gold and silver artwork which, unfortunately, they cut into small pieces to share it among themselves.

The treasure was found part way up the hill whose summit was surrounded by massive stone ramparts, while lower down on the south-eastern slope the remains of living quarters were discovered. It is significant, as R. Ghirshman pointed out, that, 'The collection falls into four very distinct groups: the first is undoubtedly Assyrian in inspiration and execution, the second is typically Scythian, the third is Assyro-Scythian in inspiration, but was probably executed by Assyrian artists, and finally the fourth group consists of the products of local workshops' (Iran, pp. 106,107). This combination of Assyrian and Scythian art may well reflect the family union between the Assyrian princess and the Scythian king Partatua. Since this valuable collection is said to have been contained in a bronze sarcophagus of the kind used at the end of the seventh century B.C., it may well have been the personal treasure of this king and his successor.

### **The Scythian Dispersion**

Strabo, referring to the time of Scythian supremacy in Asia, recorded that the Sacae 'occupied Bactriana, and acquired possession of the best land in Armenia which they left named after themselves Sacasene' (XI, viii, 4). The fate of those who went to Bactriana and other places east of the Caspian Sea it has been concluded that, so far as is known, no significant part of them ever came to Britain. We come now to consider the settlement in Sacasene, the best land in Armenia, formerly Urartu. This lies just north of the river Araxes which flows into the Caspian Sea south of the Caucasus.

The date of this expansion can now be fixed within very narrow limits, for Russian archaeologists, excavating the ruins of the ancient fortress of Karmir Blur in this region, have established that it was attacked and destroyed by the Scythians about 625 B.C. Three edged arrow heads, typical of the Scythians, embedded in the walls, as well as horse gear and other objects, mark the Scythians as the aggressors, while a collection of bronze bowls reveal the date. There were ninety-seven of these, all stamped with the name of the Urartian king in whose reign they had been issued to the garrison. Eighty-three of them were marked with the name of Sardur III whose reign ended about 620 B.C., the others being inscribed with the names of earlier kings.

### **Migration into Europe**

Following the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., and the subsequent collapse of the Assyrian power in 609, the Scythians were deprived of their most powerful ally and consequently came under increasing pressure from the

Medes. As we have seen, Herodotus records that in the reign of Cyaxares the Medes regained supremacy over them. As a result, all Scythians west of the Caspian Sea would have been forced to retreat northwards into south Russia through the Dariel Pass in the Caucasus. Clearly this migration must have begun about 600 B.C., and this agrees with the fact that the earliest Scythian tombs in Russia have been dated to about 580 B.C. It should be noted that archaeologists have arrived at this date solely on the basis of the Greek objects found in the tombs, and without any reference to the political situation described above.



*Karmir Blur was captured by the Scythians about 624 B.C.*

*The earliest Scythian tomb north of the Caucasus at Kelermes, has been dated at about 580 B. C.*

### **Evidence of the Tombs**

From the distribution of these tombs it would appear that the Scythians did not migrate round the eastern end of the Sea of Azov, but moved directly westward along the foothills of the Caucasus into the Taman Peninsula, whence they crossed the Kerch Straits into the Crimea. It was here that they displaced a Cimmerian colony from their homes north of the Black Sea, for the Kerch Straits and the Crimea were evidently the former 'Cimmerian Bosphorus and tract of land called Cimmeria' mentioned by Herodotus (IV, 12, 13). A Cimmerian tomb in the Crimea at Temir Gora, dated to N 650-600 B.C., confirms this.

A long sequence of burials, as well as the testimony of Greek historians, show that the Scythians settled down in these parts for many centuries. Other more venturesome groups, however, pressed on at an early date into the interior of Russia, as witnessed by the royal treasure named after General Melgunov which he found in 1763 buried in the Litoy barrow. This tomb dates from the first half of the sixth century, and is almost contemporary with the earliest tombs north of the Caucasus. Not long before the end of the century other groups of Scythians had got as far west as the Carpathians, for Darius, king of Persia, in an attempt to conquer their land in 512 B.C., came into contact with them soon after crossing the Danube from Thrace.

## Cultural Relationships

The earliest tombs in Russia, such as that at Kelermes on the northern slopes of the Caucasus, and the Litoy barrow, contained weapons and other articles decorated with gold that show a close connection, not only with the earliest Scythian designs at Ziviye, but also with Assyrian, median and Urartian art.

For example, in both these tombs there was a short sword in a goldcovered scabbard embossed with animal designs. The form of the scabbard embodied a heart-shaped section below the hilt with a bracket by means of which it could be slung from the belt. This construction reproduces exactly that worn by the Medes, as seen on the sculptures found at Persepolis in Persia (R. Ghirshman, Iran, p. 197), while the fantastic animal designs on these scabbards closely resemble some Assyrian creatures. Again, the handle of the Kelermes sword shows a design that embodies a sacred tree of life of a kind that is now recognized as of Urartian origin. On the other hand, the series of animals embossed on the handle of a ceremonial axe from this site is typically Scythian.

Coloured illustrations of these and many other beautiful objects have been published in *Treasures from Scythian Tombs* by M.I. Artamov, former Director of the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, who wrote: 'In the animal style so typical of Scythian art, the figures of animals in the oldest examples are of Near Eastern derivation. The compositions with the tree of life, seen in the gold settings of the swords from both Kelermes and the Melgunov treasure, not only reproduce an ancient Mesopotamian subject, but in no way differ stylistically from similar Assyrian and Urartian designs' (p.27). All this goes to show that the Scythians of south Russia must have come from south of the Caucasus, and not across the Volga from central Asia, as historians used to think.

## Customs and Beliefs

Some customs of the Scythians may well be survivals from their Israelite ancestors. We know, for example that according to the Mosaic Law the pig was unclean, and Herodotus tells us that the Scythians 'never use pigs for sacrifice, and will not even breed them anywhere in the country' (IV, 63). Hosea condemned the Israelites for using sticks for the purpose of divination (4:12), and Herodotus says: 'There are many soothsayers in Scythia, and their method is to work with willow rods. They bring great bundles of them which they put down on the ground; then they untie them, lay out each rod separately, and pronounce their prophecy' (IV, 67). In the Oxtis treasure there are a number of gold plaques depicting soothsayers, with their bundles of rods, and it is thought that the Scythians used to sew these on their garments as lucky charms.

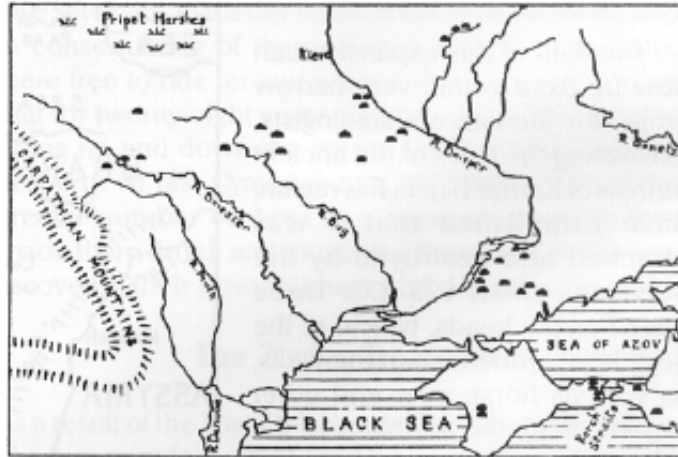
Although Herodotus says that the Scythians attached great importance to their national traditions, he nevertheless tells a story that reveals the old Israelite weakness for pagan religions. He relates that a certain Scythian named Anacharsis, while travelling in Greece, saw some people celebrating a festival in honour of the mother of the gods and, when he got home, he offered sacrifices to this goddess, for which he was duly punished by death. He also mentions another, named Scylas, who used to put on Greek clothes, and take part in Greek religious ceremonies (IV, 76-78 ).

Even at that time, intermarriage with Greek and other foreigners had already begun, for Herodotus reveals that the Scythian King Ariapithes had married, in addition to his native wife Opoea, a Greek as well as a Thracian woman (IV, 76-80). Since there were numerous Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast which were engaged in trading with the Scythians, there can be little doubt that in the course of time a considerable mixing of the races took place in this region.

## The Scythians Divided



At first the Scythians dominated the whole of the steppe country between the Carpathians and the Sea of Azov, and their territory according to Herodotus, extended to a similar distance inland (IV, 101). This agrees with the fact that some of their tombs have been found on both sides of the Dnieper nearly as far north as Kiev. During the fourth century, however, the Sarmatians began to move westwards from the Don as far as the bend in the Dnieper which, according to Herodotus, was the traditional burial ground of the Scythian Kings. It is interesting to note that no tombs in this central area have been dated after the middle of the fourth century, the greatest concentration of later burials lying to the south between the lower Dnieper and the Crimea.



*Location of Scythian tombs later than 350 B. C., showing northern and southern groups caused by the Sarmation advance from the Dnieper to the Carpathian Mountains*

It is often overlooked, however, that a considerable number of royal Scythian graves dating from the fourth century and later have been found south of Kiev and the Pripet marshes in an area extending from the Dnieper as far west as the upper reaches of the Dniester. One of the first to appreciate the significance of this fact was M.I. Rostovtsev who wrote: 'We cannot but recognize that in the fourth and third centuries the Scythians endeavoured to install themselves as a ruling class in the northern regions of their empire, to transform their suzerainty into a real domination, and to extend that domination as far as possible to the north. It will not be denied that this Scythian expansion, hitherto unnoticed, is an historical fact of the first importance' *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*, (1922, p.98).

When, therefore, the Sarmatians subsequently advanced from the Dnieper to the Carpathians during the last two centuries before the Christian era, and finally into Hungary, the Scythians became divided into a northern and a southern group. The former, being largely cut off from the cultured world of Greece and Rome, received relatively little notice from the classical historians, while attention was focused on the latter. It is well known that the southern Scythians were ultimately driven into two pockets, one in the islands of the Danube delta, the other in the Crimea (Rostovtsev, *op cit.*, p. 117; *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. IX p. 228). When these were finally liquidated by the Goths in the third century A.D., it was thought that the Scythians as a people had been altogether wiped out, but this was true only of the southern Scythians who had racially become a very mixed lot.

### **The Northern Scythians**

The testimony of both history and archaeology is that the northern Scythians continued long to retain their national identity. Thus Strabo, describing the various parts of Asia and Europe shortly before the beginning of the Christian era, wrote: 'Of the portions thus divided, the first is inhabited in the region toward the north and the ocean by the Scythian nomads and wagon dwellers, and south of these by the Sarmatians' (XI, 11, 1). Thus it is

clearly stated that at that time the Scythian nomads dwelt to the north of the Sarmatians as far as the 'ocean'. This may mean either the Baltic or the North Sea.

Again, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (IV, xiii) written early in the Christian era, mentions various islands in the 'Northern Ocean' off the coast of Scythia. One was named Baunonia, possibly Bornholm, which was said to lie 'off Scythia at a distance of a day's voyage from the coast, on the beach of which in springtime amber is cast up by the waves'. He also mentions a report that 'three days' sail from the Scythian coast there is an island of enormous size called Balcia', which may well be a description of Scandinavia. Such statements plainly reveal that the northern Scythians had migrated as far as the Baltic coast.

### A Change of Name

In his description of central Europe, from the Danube to the Baltic, Pliny states that, 'The name of the Scythians is everywhere changed to that of Sarmatae and Germans. This old designation has not been continued for any except the most outlying sections of this nation who live almost unknown to the rest of mankind' (*Natural History*, IV, xii). By outlying sections of the nation, he doubtless meant those on the north coast of Europe just mentioned. Unfortunately, the true meaning of this important statement has been completely obscured in the Loeb edition of Pliny by a mistranslation that reads: 'The name of Scythian has spread in every direction *as far as* the Sarmatae and Germans.'

The reason why the name Scythian was changed was because the country immediately north of the Black Sea had long been called Scythia, but by the last century B.C., it had become occupied largely by Sarmatians.



*Location of 'Chieftains Tombs' and other graves of the ancestors of Anglo-Saxons showing connections with the south-east.*

In order to distinguish between the Sarmatian inhabitants and the true Scythians, the Romans dropped the name Scythian and substituted Sarmatae and Germani. However, Pliny thought it unnecessary to give the reason as it was then well known. Strabo, on the other hand, as a Greek writer, felt an explanation was called for, but he confused the Scythians with the Celts. He said: 'It was for this reason that the Romans assigned to them the name Germani, as though they wished to indicate thereby that they were the "genuine" Galatae, for in the language of the Romans, "germani" means "genuine" (VII, 1, 2). He should have said the Germani were the 'genuine' *Scythians*, not Galatians.

## Archaeological Evidence

Prior to 100 B.C., the land bordering on the southern Baltic Sea - now Poland and the former East Germany - had been rather sparsely populated, but from that date onwards cemeteries increased in number with the introduction of new burial rites.

Previously, the bodies of the dead were invariably cremated, the ashes usually being buried in an urn, but grave offerings rarely accompanied the interment. Later inhumation, that is, burial without cremation, was introduced, and an increasing number of graves contained the dead person's most valued belongings. In addition, there were an increasing number of chieftains', or princes' graves, containing a wooden chamber in which the body was buried along with silver and gold ornaments.

### Timber Tombs

Since the Scythians usually buried their dead without cremation, often in timber tombs, and were noted for the quantity and value of the weapons and ornaments that were placed in them, the new burial rites may well be accounted for by their arrival in these lands.

However, owing to the terrain in northern Europe being less suitable for breeding horses than the Russian steppes, horsegear and horse skeletons are no longer found in the graves. On account of this and other minor cultural changes, the chieftains' tombs of northern Europe have not been recognized by archaeologists as Scythian, even though Strabo and Pliny reported that Scythians actually inhabited these regions.

A significant fact, noted by Polish, Scandinavian and even German scholars, is that the chieftains' graves in south Poland are at least a century older than the earliest ones on the Baltic coast, implying a migration from south to north. A further important fact is that these graves all lie on or to the west of the Vistula, the area east of that river being cut off from an immigration from south Russia by the Pripet marshes. Finally, in the early centuries of the Christian era, these burial rites spread north into the Danish islands and Jutland peninsula.

Now Tacitus and Ptolemy name the region of the River Elbe and the base of the Jutland Peninsula as the places inhabited by the Angles and Saxons before they came to Britain. According to Roman terminology, this was 'Germany' but it is interesting to note that the British historian, Nennius, in his account of the arrival of Hengist and Horsa in Thanet, says that 'messengers were sent to Scythia' for reinforcements. The context shows that these came in fact, from north Germany, so evidently the ancient name of the 'genuine' Scythians persisted long in northern Europe.

It is thus possible to trace our Anglo-Saxon ancestors back, not only to northern Europe, but to south Russia and finally to Media where the Israelites were placed in captivity.