

## BOOK REVIEW

*Greco-Scythian Art and the Birth of Eurasia: From Classical Antiquity to Russian Modernity.* By CASPAR MEYER. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xxix + 431. Hardcover, \$160.00. ISBN 978-0-19-968233-1

We have all admired their beauty—the precious gold and silver Greco-Scythian objects that display scenes of hunting, banqueting, and ‘daily life.’ Dating from the fourth century BC (and later), these artifacts combine both Classical Greek aesthetics and Scythian subject matters. While they are often presented in richly illustrated catalogues<sup>1</sup> with descriptions that detail their use<sup>2</sup> in antiquity or in volumes that discuss the Greek colonization of the Black Sea region, the reader is left unaware of the circumstances of their discovery and the powerful influence that these objects have had in ancient and more modern times. Caspar Meyer’s *Greco-Scythian Art and the Birth of Eurasia* looks to fill this scholarly lacuna, and, through a careful appraisal of previous studies, the author aspires to rid Bosphoran archaeology of the culture-historical and Eurasianist approach often adopted by his contemporaries and predecessors.<sup>3</sup>

The book can be divided into three sections: Chapter 1; Chapter 2; and Chapters 3-6. In Chapter 1 (“Introduction”), Meyer focuses on the inherent problems of ‘Greco-Scythian’ art: from the designation ‘Greco-Scythian’ (a misleading term from the early nineteenth century) to the questionable authority of ancient authors like Herodotus<sup>4</sup> and Dio Chrysostom; from the binary mode of

<sup>1</sup> See: E.D. Reeder and E. Jacobson’s *Scythian Gold: Treasure from Ancient Ukraine* (1999); *From the Lands of the Scythians: Ancient Treasures from the Museums of the U.S.S.R., 3000 B.C.-100 B.C.* (1975).

<sup>2</sup> Vlassova, E.V. 2001. “The Scythian Drinking-Horn,” in *Northern Pontic Antiquities in the State Hermitage Museum*, edited by J. Boardman, S.L. Solovyov, G.R. Tsetsckhladze, 71-111. Leiden: Brill

<sup>3</sup> D.S. Raevskii, *Mir skifskoi kul'tury* (World of Scythian Culture) (Moscow, 2006); A. Yu. Alekseev, *Skifskaya khronika (Skify v VII-IV vv. do n.e.: istoriko-arkheologicheskii ocherk)* (Scythian chronicle: The Scythians in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.: historical-archaeological essay) (St Petersburg, 1992); F.V. Shelov-Kovedyaev, *Istoriya Bospora v VI-IV vv. do n.e.* (A history of the Bosphorus in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) (Moscow, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> For Herodotus and the Scythians, see: A.I. Ivantchik, 2011, “The Funeral of Scythian Kings: The Historical Reality and the Description of Herodotus (4.71-72),” in *The Barbarians of Ancient*

analysis frequently adopted in Black Sea archaeology to the powerful assumptions and agendas of earlier scholarship. Indeed, our modern valuation of Greco-Scythian artifacts continue to be directed by nineteenth and twentieth century sources that privilege the naturalism of Greek art, tout the cultural dominance of the Hellenistic civilization, and evaluate the Greco-Scythian compositions as genre scenes. For Meyer, who combines the visual evidence with their archaeological contexts, the importance of these objects goes beyond their Hellenic traits: they allowed for a visual method of communication in an area inhabited by numerous cultures.

In order to understand the modern Russian milieu in which Greco-Scythian art was received, Chapter 2 (“Classical Art and Russian Identity”) reveals both the pre- and post-Tsarist attitudes toward Classical art. Tsar Peter the Great (1682-1725) was a Greco-Roman enthusiast, and through the adoption and various displays of Classical visual culture (i.e., Western culture), he aimed for Russia to overcome the dominance of the Orthodox Church and to appear equivalent to Western powers. This enthusiasm for Classical culture continued during Tsar Nicholas I’s reign (1825-1855) and manifested itself in the original design, organization, and decoration of the New Hermitage. Attached to the palace in St. Petersburg, the new museum displayed cultural products that bolstered the image of the Tsar and aligned his rule with those of the ancient Bosporan kingdoms. Although wildly unpopular, education reforms even integrated Classical languages, which became mandatory for those entering university. After the 1905 Revolution, however, in order to distance itself from Tsarist rule, the “atheist materialism” (i.e., Classical art) glorified by the monarchy was condemned and Orthodoxy traditions were exalted.

The second part of the book (Chapters 3–6) considers the physical evidence. Chapter 3 (“Defining the Corpus”) lays out the chronological and geographical parameters of the artifacts. Separating himself from previous works that attempt to unite archaeological material and ancient literary sources (e.g., A.I. Ivantchik’s *Kimmerier und Skythen* [2001]), Meyer explores the early features and intermittent appearances of Greco-Scythian metalwork in the sixth and fifth centuries and the sudden onset of continuous deposits in the fourth century. According to the author, it is likely that there were numerous workshops catering to dif-

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*Europe: Realities and Interactions*, edited by L. Bonfante, 71-106; H.J. Kim, 2010, “Herodotus’ Scythians Viewed from a Central Asian Perspective: Its Historicity and Significance,” *Ancient West & East* 9, 115-134.

ferent markets, and the primary location of Greco-Scythian metal production was in Panticapaeum (and nearby).

In Chapter 4 (“Political Monuments of the Early Spartocid State”), Bosporan socio-political organization is examined alongside larger scale monuments that expressed elite ideology, conveyed religious messages, and/or referenced Greek civic iconography. Based on the evidence presented, Meyer argues for similarities between Spartocid (i.e. a Thracian kingdom along the Bosporos) and Athenian manners of elite visual propaganda despite their cultural differences in bureaucratic control (i.e. Spartocids ruled over people; Athenians ruled over land). Larger monuments expressing power, however, were not suitable for the rural zones of the steppe. In this setting, the elite preferred small objects of precious metal, and Chapter 5 (“Looking at Greco-Scythian Art”) introduces the reader to the iconography of these artifacts. Examining several significant pieces, Meyer discusses how Greek craftsmen adapted their aesthetic to suit local Bosporan tastes, how modern scholarship has interpreted these scenes, and how foreign audiences would have perceived this imagery. To approach the evidence, the author adopts a methodology that argues for inherent meaning in all images and evaluates scenes of hunting, warfare, and banqueting. Although these particular types of recurring motifs would have been familiar to the local elite, Meyer asserts that the figures were not portrayed with “ethnographic realism,” as scholarship often claims. Rather, they exhibit idealized features and behavior that betrays a Hellenistic (and foreign) perspective.

In his sixth and final chapter (“Greco-Scythian Art in Practice”), Meyer places the objects into their context of ritual exchange and mortuary deposition, arguing that fourth century Bosporan burial mounds, known as kurgans, show a “broadening repertoire of gender and status roles” (287) and reveal evidence of convivial activity. The book concludes with a short “Conclusion” (Chapter 7), an appendix that features a selection of fifth and fourth century kurgans from various sites (e.g. Nymphaeum, Kul-Oba, Patignoti, etc.), and several indices (e.g., ancient authors, inscriptions, and general material). Most useful, his bibliography translates titles from Russian to English.

Throughout the manuscript, Meyer is critical of the often unchallenged authority of prior Bosporan scholars, most notably the early twentieth century titan

M.I. Rostovtzeff.<sup>5</sup> Confronting the antiquarian ideas regarding this geographical region and the Eurasianist aims of books like *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (1922), the author offers compelling evidence for repositioning the field outside the agenda of Eurasianism and sheds light on how the Greco-Scythian evidence was utilized to further this political movement. Particularly intriguing, especially for iconographical studies, is the author's consideration of numerous examples (rather than isolated pieces), his skepticism that the objects portray Scythians with ethnographic realism, and his statement that they "cannot refer to more than a narrow register of any social reality" (211).

Unquestionably, Meyer's work is ambitious in its scope, displaying a firm command and an elegant synthesis of numerous avenues of data (e.g., nineteenth century archaeological reports, recent findings, epigraphic studies, numismatic evidence). Given the inherent beauty of Greco-Scythian metalwork, it is surprising that there are no color photographs; though, it should be noted, there are numerous black-and-white pictures of excellent quality, and they are suitably placed in the text in order to enhance the author's discussion. Recommended to advanced graduate students and scholars in the field, this book allows the reader to understand the ancient context of *and* audience for Greco-Scythian art and the tremendous political influence these artifacts have had in modernity.

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<sup>5</sup> See also: C. Meyer, 2009, "Rostovtzeff and the Classical Origins of Eurasianism," *Anabases: Traditions et réception de l'Antiquité* 9, 183-195; C. Meyer, 2011, "Iranians and Greeks after 90 Years: A Religious History of Southern Russia in Ancient Times," *Ancient West & East* 10, 75-159.