

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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Nomads of the Eurasian Steppe and Greeks of the Northern Black Sea Region: Encounter of Two Great Civilisations in Antiquity and Early Middle Ages

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The Northern Black Sea region and, in general, Eastern Europe for two millennia played an important role in the ethnogenetic, migrational, political, economic, religious and cultural development of mankind, since they were practically the last station on the way so to say “from China to the Greeks”, like the famous way “from the Varangians to the Greeks” through Eastern Europe from Scandinavia to the Black Sea or that “from the Germans to the Greeks”, the Gothic movement to the Northern Black Sea region. It was in this region that a meeting took place between various cultures of antiquity and the Middle Ages, which came here from the remotest parts of the inhabited land, called in antiquity ‘oikumene’.

Greek colonization of the Northern Black Sea Region

As we know, starting from the 7th century B.C. the Northern Pontic region began to be settled by Greek colonists, who founded many colonies, cities, and settlements here.¹ From the Danube to the Caucasus, the entire Black Sea coast line was densely dotted with Greek cities. The largest of them were Tyras and Nikonion – cities in the lower Dniester, Olbia – a city in the mouth of the Southern Bug and the Dnieper, Chersonesos – in the vicinity of the present-day city Sevastopol in the Crimea, there are there also Theodosia, Nymphaeum and Panticapaeum (now known as Kerch, on the western shore of the Kerch Strait), Phanagoria, Hermonassa and Gorgippia on the east coast of the strait (Fig. 1).

¹ In detail: Tsetskhladze 1998; Petropulos 2005; Fornasier 2016.



Figure 1. Greek colonies of the Northern Black Sea coast

Most of the colonies on the northern Black Sea coast were founded in the 6th century B.C., and it was at this time and in this place that they met with the Scythians. It was the first meeting of the great Greek civilization with the nomads moving along the Eurasian steppe belt from east to west and the most important event for Eurasian history.

The arrival of Asian nomads to the Northern Black Sea region

The list of nomads who were coming to the Northern Black Sea region from the depths of Asia for more than half a thousand years is impressive: they were Cimmerians, Scythians, Sauromatians, Sarmatians, Jazyges, Aorsi, Alans, Huns, Avars, Khazars, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Pechenegs, Polovtsy, Tatars, Mongols, etc.²

In the 1st millennium B.C. and in the 1st centuries A.D., the native populations of South-Eastern and Central Europe faced the expansion and movement of the Central Asian peoples pressing westwards. Some indigenous tribes retreated, setting in motion other peoples, while others mingled with the newcomers, giving rise to new hybrid cultures. The contribution of the Iranian peoples to the cultures of ancient Europe is discernible in many aspects, including Germanic religion, Celtic folk-poetry, and early Slavic civilization. The influx of the Iranian steppe peoples into Europe was linked with tribal movements in Central Asia. This was a

² The problem in general: Seaman 1989; Kljashtorny, Savinov 1994; Kradin 2007.

consistent pattern, and we have evidence of several great migrations in the 1st millennium B.C. and the 1st millennium A.D.³

Already Herodotus, living in the 5th century B.C., had observed such processes: “Except for the Hyperboreans, all these nations (and first the Arimaspians) are always at war with their neighbors; the Issedones were pushed from their lands by the Arimaspians, and the Scythians by the Issedones, and the Cimmerians, living by the southern sea, were hard pressed by the Scythians and left their country”.⁴

The fate of the Alans, the Iranian-speaking people who came to the Northern Black Sea coast at the turn of the era, is indicative. According to ancient Greek and Roman and Chinese sources,⁵ the first Alans came out of the Trans-Caspian regions, where they lived, presumably between the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers.

The eastern region, inhabited by the Alans, was included in the sphere of influence of China of the Late (Western) Han era. The Later Han Dynasty chronicle, the Hou Hanshu, chapter 88⁶ (completed in the 5th century A.D.), mentions that the steppe land Yancai had become a vassal state of the Kangju and was now known as Alanliao (阿蘭聊).

From the end of the 19th century, commentators began to associate the name of this place, Alan, with the European Alans. The question of the localization of Yancai / A-lan is controversial. Sima Qian in his historical work “Shiji” (24: 36; 32: 36) mentions that Yancai bordered the “Great Lake” with sloping shores, which suggests the Caspian or rather the Aral Sea.

In any case Chinese sources report changes in the steppe world reflecting a new state of affairs with the emergence of a people that was able to win dominance over the other tribes of western Central Asia. It seems likely that the immediate catalyst for their movement was the Kangju, a powerful nomadic people well known to Chinese sources that lived in the Syr Darya basin, from Farghana to the Aral Sea.⁷

It is well known that in the 4th century A.D. some of the Alans participated in the Great Migration of Peoples and ended up in Western Europe (in Gaul) and even in Northern Africa, where, together with the Vandals, they formed a state that existed till the middle of the 6th century.

The settled Greeks of the Northern Black Sea region, with a high level of political, economic and cultural development, faced nomads who were at a lower level of social development. These peoples were most often hostile to the Greeks and were eager for war booty, and the Greeks had to use huge diplomatic, military, political, and economic resources in building relationships with the “barbarians”,

3 Olbrycht 1998: 101–140.

4 Herod. 4.13; trans. by A.D. Godley.

5 For the fullest collection of sources on the history of the Alans: Alemany 2000.

6 About this document: Hill 2009.

7 Olbrycht 1998: 221.

as the Greeks called them. The range of these relationships was very wide – from military confrontation, often resulting in the defeat of the Greeks, through complex tribute relations, which relieved the severity of the confrontation, to the incorporation of the nomads into the Greek state, which resulted in the Hellenization of their elites, sedentarization of the nomads, and the introduction of “barbarians” to ancient civilization.

In this paper, I will try to consider some of these aspects of the meeting of two civilizations in the Northern Black Sea region.

The meeting of two civilizations

A lot has been done in the scholarly literature to clarify the essence of nomadic communities, their political and economic organization, and their need for relationships between nomads and farmers.⁸ The nomads could not live without the products of agricultural and handicraft products of the sedentary population. For this reason, they successfully exploited the agricultural periphery by non-economic and violent means (robbery, war, contribution, extortion of gifts, non-equivalent trade, tribute, etc.).

As for the military superiority of the nomads, there is a famous statement by the ‘father of history’ Herodotus about the Scythians (IV, 46): “But the Scythian race has made the cleverest discovery that we know in what is the most important of all human affairs ... they have contrived that no one who attacks them, can escape, and no one can catch them if they do not want to be found. For when men have no established cities or forts, but are all nomads and mounted archers, not living by tilling the soil but by raising cattle and carrying their dwellings on wagons, how can they not be invincible and unapproachable?”

The Greek city-states of the Northern Black Sea region were very attractive for nomads as objects of robbery, as potential tributaries, as suppliers of many goods – weapons, clothes, luxury goods, food, in particular, wine etc.

The Greeks of the Northern Black Sea region, meeting new hordes of Asian nomads again and again,⁹ used all possible forms of restraining the warlike nomads.

Ancient authors often report a military confrontation between nomads and the Greek cities. The Greek writer Dio Chrysostom, who towards the end of the 1st century A.D. visited the North Pontic city of Olbia (or Borysthenes), wrote (Or. Boryst. XXXVI, 1-6): “The city of Borysthenes, as to its size, does not correspond to its ancient fame, because of its ever-repeated seizure and its wars. For since the city has lain in the midst of barbarians now for so long a time – barbarians who are virtually the most warlike of all – it is always in a state of war and has often

⁸ Sellnow 1968; Khazanov 1994; Khazanov, Wink 2001; Kradin 2007.

⁹ Vinogradov 2008: 13-27.

been captured”. Dio tells about a local youth, Callistratos, who “was brave in the war and killed or captured many of the Sauromates” even though the day before “the Scythians made a raid and some sentinels were killed, others may have been taken captive” (15–16). The Scythian raids are known mostly due to fires and the construction of fortifications in the cities of the Bosphoran kingdom in the 5th century B.C., which have been discovered by archaeologists.¹⁰

We also know that nomads could establish a kind of protectorate over the Greek Northern Black Sea cities.¹¹ This, in particular, is indicated by the release of the Olbian coins, silver staters from the 2nd third of the 5th century B.C. with the name of the Scythian ruler Eminakes and the image of a Scythian pulling a bow (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The silver stater with the name of the Scythian ruler Eminakes

This kind of protectorate can be assumed in the case of the Scythian king Scyles, who, according to Herodotus (IV, 78), often came to Olbia with his army, “visiting” the city for several months while his army “fed” in the suburbs. In addition to feeding the troops, it is very likely that certain taxes could be levied, which could be expressed in the system of gifts to the king and his entourage. No wonder that in the graves of Scythian aristocracy archaeologists find so many luxuries worked by Greek masters¹² (see e.g. Fig. 3 and 4).

¹⁰ Vinogradov 2005: 239–244.

¹¹ Marchenko 2005: 107–113.

¹² Rolle 1991; Jacobson 1995.

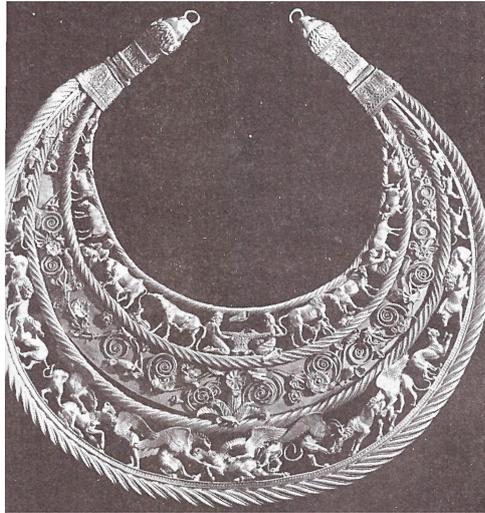


Figure 3. Golden pectoral from kurgan Tolstaja mogila (4th c. B.C.)



Figure 4. Vase from kurgan Kul'-Oba near Kerch (4th c. B.C.)

So, Greek writer Strabo at the end of the 1st century B.C. notes: “Now although the Nomads are warriors rather than brigands, yet they go to war only for the sake of the tributes due them; for they turn over their land to any people who wish to till it, and are satisfied if they receive in return for the land the tribute they have assessed, which is a moderate one, assessed with a view, not to an abundance, but only to the daily necessities of life; but if the tenants do not pay, the Nomads go to war with them. ... But men who are confident that they are powerful enough either to ward off attacks easily or to prevent any invasion do not pay regularly; such was the case with [the Bosporan king] Asander, who... walled off the isthmus of the Chersonesus which is near Lake Maeotis and is three hundred and sixty stadia in width, and set up ten towers for every stadium.”¹³ The last Bosporan king, Pairysades, according to Strabo (VII, 4, 4), “was unable to hold out against the barbarians, who kept exacting greater tribute than before, and he therefore gave over the sovereignty to [the Pontic king] Mithridates Eupator”.

Neighborhood with nomads led the residents of Greek cities to work closely with them politically, economically, and culturally.¹⁴ The founding of the city of Tanais at the mouth of the Don can be considered one of the clearest examples of such interaction.

Tanais as a Greco-barbarian city

It was founded by the Bosporan rulers as a trading emporium, apparently in 280–275 B.C. and became the largest city in the Northern Azov region with a mixed Greco-barbarian population, which served as the center for the trade of the Greeks with the nomads.¹⁵ Here is what Strabo writes about it (XI, 2, 3): “It was a common emporium, partly of the Asiatic and the European nomads, and partly of those who navigated the lake from the Bosphorus, the former bringing slaves, hides, and such other things as nomads possess, and the latter giving in exchange clothing, wine, and the other things that belong to civilised life.”

In the city, which can be considered a model of the symbiosis of two civilizations, there were authorities that governed the Greeks (Hellenarchs) and the local people (Archonts of the Tanaites). Nomads were interested in the existence of the Greek cities that organized trade relations for them. So much so that, as Dio Chrysostom wrote, when the Greeks, after one of the attacks of the barbarians, were going to leave their city of Olbia-Borysthenes, its inhabitants again settled the city, “with the consent of the Scythians, because of their need for traffic with the Greeks who might use that port, ...and the Scythians themselves

¹³ VII, 4, 6; here and further trans. by H.L. Jones.

¹⁴ Much material about the interaction of Greeks and barbarians can be found in Marchenko (ed.) 2005.

¹⁵ Knipovich 1949; Shelov 1970; Shelov 1972; Bötger et al. 2002: 65–85.

had neither the ambition nor the knowledge to equip a trading-centre of their own after the Greek manner.”¹⁶

Nomads at the service of Greek rulers

Nomadic military detachments were often recruited by the Bosporan kings for actions against their enemies – other nomads or rivals, pretenders to royal power. This is reported by the ancient authors. For example, Diodorus from Sicily, telling about the strife within the royal family of the Bosporan rulers, informs us (XX, 22) that in 310 B.C. “after the death of Pairysades, who was king of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, his sons Eumelus, Satyrus, and Prytanis were engaged in a struggle against each other for the primacy. ... Eumelus, after concluding a treaty of friendship with some of the barbarians who lived near by and collecting a strong army, set up a rival claim to the throne. ... Enrolled in the army of Satyros were not more than two thousand Greek mercenaries and an equal number of Thracians, but all the rest were Scythian allies, more than twenty thousand foot-soldiers and not less than ten thousand horses.”

The Sarmatians and the Alans concluded agreements of alliance with the Greek states of the Northern Black Sea Region, although these were not always equal treaties. As a rule, they were initiated by the settled societies, as follows from an analysis of Strabo’s report (XI, 4, 5) and some epigraphic monuments.

It is interesting to note that in order to maintain contact with nomads who did not speak Greek, there were in the Bosporan kingdom some associations of translators.¹⁷ Thus, one of the inscriptions, found in the Northern Pontic region, refers to a certain “Gerakas, Pontic’s son, the main translator of the Alans (*archermeneus Alanon*)”, i.e. the head of a certain guild of translators from the Alans (CIRB, 1053). There is another inscription from Rome, which refers to “Aspurgus, son of Biomassus, translator of the Sarmatians (*hermeneus Sarmaton*)” (CIL VI, 5207).

The nomadic elite, attracted by the achievements of Greek civilization, was accustomed to its achievements. This was reflected in the fact that representatives of the nomadic nobility could become with time a part of the ruling elite of Greek cities. This is evidenced by the burial mounds, a large number of which are located near the capital of the Bosporan kingdom Panticapaeum, in which both Bosporan aristocracy and nomadic barbarians are buried¹⁸ (Fig. 5).

¹⁶ Dio Chrys. XXXVI (Borysth.), 5.

¹⁷ Kazanskij 2014: 188–199; Podossinov 2016: 230–235.

¹⁸ Vinogradov 2005: 245–258.

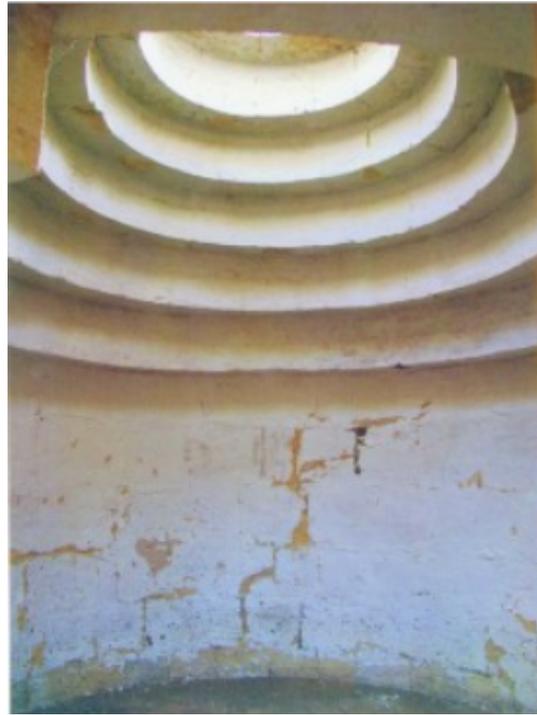


Figure 5. The inner room of a kurgan near Panticapaeum

An impressive example of such a union of the Greek and barbarian elements in the ruling elite of the Bosporan kingdom is the case of the last Bosporan king, Pairisades, who in 109 B.C. was killed by a pupil of Pairisades, the Scythian prince Saumakes during the uprising of the Scythians under his leadership.

The meeting of two civilizations – the settled, highly civilized, and the nomadic, from the point of view of the Greeks and Romans, barbarous – was highly beneficial for both parties. We can see as the outcome of their interaction both the Hellenization of the barbarians, and the barbarization of the Hellenes.¹⁹

The Hellenization of the barbarians and barbarization of the Hellenes

The Hellenization of the barbarians manifested itself in the famous episode of a visit of the Scythian king Scyles to the Greek city of Olbia, which has already been

¹⁹ Podossinov 1996: 415-425.

mentioned above. Herodotus tells it as follows (IV, 78): “So Scyles was king of Scythia; but he was in no way content with the Scythian way of life, and was much more inclined to Greek ways ...So this is what he would do: he would lead the Scythian army to the city of the Borysthenites..., and when he arrived there would leave his army in the suburb of the city, while he himself, entering within the walls and shutting the gates, would take off his Scythian apparel and put on Greek dress... and in every way follow the Greek manner of life, and worship the gods according to Greek usage... He did this often; and he built a house in Borysthenes, and married a wife of the people of the country and brought her there”.

But the reverse process – the barbarization of the Greeks – also took place in the history of this great meeting. The very presence of the society with the royal, despotic institutions of the nomadic empires – be it Scythian, Sarmatian, Alanian or any other – next to the Greek traditionally democratic state (or even inside the state) could not but influence the character of the Greek government institutions.

Already since the end of the 4th century B.C. the Greek rulers of the Bosporan state in their titles found themselves to be archons of Bosphorus and kings (*basileuon*) of various local tribes, which they attached to Bosphorus.²⁰ After a while, already in the 3rd century B.C., they began to call themselves kings of Bosphorus, which turned this Greek state into a typical dynastic monarchy.²¹ In my opinion, in this process, it is possible and necessary to see the influence of the barbarian periphery on the political system of the Greek state, stimulating the transformation of the polis democratic model, which was traditional for the Greeks, into a dynastic monarchy.

The barbarization of the Greek cities manifested itself in many aspects of life. We can talk about the famous Greek-Scythian art, in which Scythian motifs were developed by Greek masters (the famous “Scythian animal style,”)²² and about Scythian kurgans on the territory of the greatest cities of the Bosphorus, in which Scythian kings were buried; about the Scythian mercenaries in the service of the Bosporan rulers, about the influence of the military affairs of the local tribes on the Bosporans, about mixed marriages, about the Iranian names in Greek inscriptions, about the barbarian roots of royal names, and finally about the Sarmatization of the Bosphorus, which happened in the 1st centuries A.D.

The Sarmatization of the Bosporan kingdom as a result of the encounter of nomadic and Greek civilizations

A few words about this Sarmatization. It is assumed that there was a large influx of Sarmatian tribes into the Bosporan territory in the 1st centuries A.D., and as a

20 CIRB 6, 6a, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 25, 971, 972, 1014, 1015, 1037, 1038, 1039, 1040, 1042.

21 CIRB 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 974, 1043, 1044, 1046.

22 Rostovtzeff 1929.

result the Sarmatians began to constitute the majority of the kingdom's population, and the Sarmatian culture began to predominate over the Greek. This hypothesis was formulated by the prominent Russian historian Michail Rostovtzeff at the beginning of 20th century.²³ He believed that in the Roman era, the Bosphorans adopted Sarmatian military tactics, weapons, clothing, culture, and art styles and that the Sarmatian language was native to many inhabitants of the kingdom, supplanting the Greek language, which remained only as a language of school and state. And although scholars in recent decades have had many doubts regarding the theory of total Sarmatization of Bosphorus,²⁴ it is impossible to deny the fact of the great influence of the nomadic way of life.

This can be seen, for example, in the frescoes of Bosporan crypts – they depict the Iranian equestrian combat technique – a duel between two horsemen supported by foot soldiers. (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Painting in the crypt of Anthesterias in Panticapaeum. End of the 1st c. B.C. – beg. of the 1st c. A.D.

Bosporan weapons changed – here they are a Scythian-Sarmatian scaly or annulate cuirass, an Iranian conical helmet, a round or oval shield, Scythian bow and arrows, and a large assault spear; all of these are weapons of Scythian and Sarmatian heavily armed archers and spearmen.

Dio Chrysostom, whom I have quoted more than once, wrote as an eyewitness about the clothes of a young Olbiopolites: “He had a great cavalry sabre, suspended from his girdle, and he was wearing trousers and all the rest of the Scythian costume, and from his shoulders there hung a small black cape of thin material, as is usual for the people of Borysthenes. In fact, the rest of their apparel in general is regularly black, through the influence of a certain tribe of Scythians, the Blackcloaks, so named by the Greeks doubtless for that very reason”.²⁵ The reliefs of a gravestone in the Northern Black Sea region also show the spread among the

²³ Rostovtzeff 1922: 156–180.

²⁴ Maslennikov 1990: 9–15.

²⁵ Dio Chrys. XXXVI (Borysth.), 7.

Greeks of a nomadic costume, including pants like the Persian trousers.²⁶ Apparently, this costume was used by the cavalry, who adopted, along with their clothing, many methods of warfare and types of weapons from the local, more developed cavalry of nomadic tribes (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. *The Dedication from Tanais with the image of Tryphon in Sarmatian vestments (2nd c. A.D.)*

The epigraphies of Olbia and other cities of the Northern Black Sea region contain a large number of Iranian names of people who had important government positions. For example, one such inscription is a decree from Olbia from the end of the 1st – beginning of the 2nd century A.D.: “In the good hour! Strategists, led by Anaximenes, son of Anaximenes: Purfakes, son of Somachos, Sabeinos, son of Apollutos, Abroagos, son of Susulon, Farnagos, son of Zethos, and Kaskenos, son of Kasagos, dedicated gold Nike on a silver base to Apollo the Prostates for the health of the city and their own!”²⁷

²⁶ Kreuz 2012: 235–238.

²⁷ Knipovoch, Levi 1968: 71–72.

In this inscription more than half of the mentioned strategists, i.e. military leaders, have Iranian names! Moreover, even the names of the Bosporan kings, dating from the 1st century A.D., are of local, “barbarian” origin (Aspurgos, Rhescuporis, Gepaiperis, Sauromates, Rhoimetalkes, Ininthimaios, Pharsanzes, Chedobios, Teiranos, Thothorsos – there is not one Greek name!).

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the meeting of the two great civilizations in the ancient and early medieval times did not pass without a trace, as both were enriched with the achievements of each other and practically merged with each other at this great Eurasian crossroads.

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