Scythians
Warriors of ancient Siberia

Please do not remove from the exhibition
Quote on wall:

I have never fled for fear of any man, nor do I now flee from you ... come, find [the graves of our fathers] and attempt to destroy them; then you shall know whether we will fight you ...

Anacreon (about 582–485 BC), Greek poet
Frozen in time

The Scythians buried their dead with everything they needed in the afterlife: weapons, food, jewellery and clothing. The most important men and women were buried in large tombs, and sometimes other people were executed to act as their companions or servants.

When a high-ranking person died, they were placed in a coffin with their prized possessions. The coffin was placed in a felt-lined log chamber, constructed at the foot of a deep grave pit. Outside the chamber, the decorated bodies of their saddled horses were positioned facing the rising sun. The pit was then filled and covered by a mound of stones.

In the Altai Mountains, graves could only be dug in summer when the ground was not frozen, so bodies were mummified by specialists who replaced the organs with horsehair, pine needles and larch cones.
Image caption: Section through burial mound 5 at Pazyryk showing the log-cabin chamber at the foot of the burial pit capped by a stone mound that prevented the ground below from defrosting. Illustration: after S.I. Rudenko, 1970

Image caption: Excavations in progress in 1948, with removal of logs in the grave shaft at Pazyryk, Altai Mountains.

Image caption: Using buckets of water to melt the ice inside the tomb chamber.

Image caption: Field conservation of a large felt hanging from burial mound 5 at Pazyryk in 1949.

Image caption: Excavating inside the tomb chamber of burial mound 2 at Pazyryk in 1948.

Photos © Archives of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, St Petersburg
Family label:

Dig through time
These images show us archaeological digs. Scythians were buried with their possessions and most of the objects in this exhibition were found in graves. We can learn about people’s lives from the objects they leave behind.

Thinking about the objects you’ve seen, what would have been the best and worst things about life as a Scythian?

Images of excavations at Pazyryk, Ak-Alakha-3, and Arzhan-2
Duration: 3 minutes
This display is silent

Image caption: Scythian burial mounds in southern Siberia.
© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin
Massive log coffin with lid
This Scythian coffin was one of the first spectacular discoveries made during excavations in southern Siberia in the 1940s. Coffin size indicated status: the largest coffins such as this belonged to chiefs and were hewn from logs, whereas most people were buried in plank-built coffins. This coffin and its lid were carved from thick larch trunks. The exterior was covered with 4 cm wide birch bark strips, pasted diagonally in two overlapping layers, and then decorated.

The holes allowed ropes to lower it into the tomb, and the lid was nailed shut with large bronze nails. There is a mended crack in the lid, which probably formed while the wood was being worked, stitched with a leather cord passed through specially drilled holes.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Wood
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
An elite Scythian burial

… whenever the ruler has died, the Scythians dig a great four-cornered pit in the ground … Then, having laid the dead in the tomb on a couch, they plant spears on each side of the body and lay across them wooden planks, which they then roof over with plaited osiers; in the open space which is left in the tomb they bury … one of the ruler’s concubines, his cupbearer, his cook, his groom, his squire, and his messenger, besides horses and golden cups … Having done this they all build a great barrow of earth, vying enviously with one another to make this as great as may be.

Herodotus (484–425 BC), Greek historian
Image: a felt hanging from Pazyryk, 3rd century BC
The interiors of Scythian burial chambers were hung with felt on the walls and covering the floor. This image shows a famous felt hanging from burial mound 5 at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains. The scene – repeated at intervals – depicts an enthroned female figure who is believed to be a goddess, facing a Scythian horseman. The full height of the hanging is 4.5m which is greater than the 1.4m height of the tomb chamber, meaning it probably hung in either a large yurt or an open-air enclosure, before it was buried with the deceased.

© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Elk coffin decoration
This elk is one of 13 appliqués that decorated a coffin in burial mound 2 at Pazyryk. Like the nearby cockerels from mound 1, they were attached to the wood with small iron nails. They may have been covered with tin foil that no longer survives.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Leather
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Leather coffin decorations

Chiefs’ coffins were often decorated with carving or appliqués. The sides of the coffin nearby were decorated with 14 of these leather appliqués, originally covered with tin foil, depicting standing or fighting pairs of cockerels.

Images of cockerels first appear at Pazyryk around 300 BC and gradually start replacing eagles in animal-style art. They feature on clothing, vessels, headgear, horse saddlery and tattoos. There is no evidence that chickens were domesticated in the region, but they were known at the time in northern China.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Nails and griffin nail-cover
Nails were used to hang felt covers inside log burial chambers and for ornamenting and securing coffin lids. Bronze nails were often removed by tomb robbers so few complete nails survive. The griffin originally covered a nail securing a coffin lid. It was perhaps thought to offer protection to the deceased.

Nails: late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Bronze, wood
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Griffin: 4th–3rd century BC
Burial mound 11, Berel, northern Kazakhstan
Bronze
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

Mallet
All the tools used for a burial were deposited in the grave as part of the burial rite. These included mallets, stakes, hand tools, ladders, and carts. The end of this mallet is cracked from use. It was probably used for driving stakes into the hard ground to break it up before shovelling.
Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Wood
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**Ladder fragment**

Scythian burial pits were deep, as much as 4 to 5m below ground level, which made a ladder necessary. Ladders were usually made of unshaped tree trunks, with branch stubs or notches serving as steps. Until the 20th century, similar ladders were used to access sunken log cabins used as winter dwellings in southern Siberia. It is uncertain whether seasonal structures were used in ancient times.

3rd century BC
Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Wood
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Birchbark from the ceiling of a tomb

The log-cabin-like tomb chambers of Pazyryk were generally covered with four or five layers of birch bark. Broad strips of bark were stitched together with ropes into sheets. Their ends hung down from the chamber’s roof, covering about half of the walls. Ordinary burials were covered with larch bark rather than birch bark, and potentilla branches were spread under the corpses or used as stuffing for leather pillows. The birch bark covering was waterproof, but the moisture trapped inside the chambers condensed and froze.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Birch bark
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Detail of a roaring lion’s head, seen in profile on the upper border of the rug. Illustration: after S.I. Rudenko, 1970
Felt rug with a decorated border
The floor and walls of many Scythian burial chambers were adorned with large sheets of plain or coloured felt. These fragments come from a wall covering in burial mound 1 at Pazyryk.

The sewn-on upper border has three bands: two composed of alternating triangles sewn with twisted sinew, and a white middle band decorated with felt cutouts of roaring lions’ heads. Lions did not live in the steppe and this design is based on one from the Persian empire.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
The Scythian world was not isolated – varied finds from burials reveal trade and cultural interaction. By 200 BC the Scythians controlled a vast region from northern China to the Black Sea.

A connected world

Objects found in Scythian graves reveal wide international connections. The nomads’ homelands bordered the major settled civilisations of China, Assyria and the Persian empire. They came into regular contact with these neighbours, as well as with Greek colonists in the Black Sea region, through trade, war and diplomacy.

The Scythians came from the east, conquered the tribes in the northern Caucasus and pushed into the Middle East. According to Herodotus, two Persian kings fought unsuccessful campaigns against them in the Black Sea and Central Asia. The Scythians tactically lured these armies deep outside their own territory.
Objects found in nomads’ tombs illustrate their connections. Some were taken as war booty. Others combine Near Eastern imagery or Greek art with Scythian motifs, and must have been manufactured for Scythians by foreign craftspeople.

**Image caption:** Skunkha (far right), a Scythian leader captured in 519 BC by Darius I, king of the Persian empire (522–486 BC). His capture is depicted in this rock relief ordered by Darius at Mount Bisitun in Iran. Photo © R. Boucharlat

**Image caption:** Detail depicting a Scythian on a vessel from the Black Sea region. It is likely that this vessel was made by a Greek metalworker for a Scythian patron. © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin
Image caption: The oldest-known knotted-pile woollen carpet (3rd century BC) is among the unique Near Eastern artefacts from burial mound 5 at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains, southern Siberia.
© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin

Vessel depicting Scythian tribesmen
This famous gold vessel is among the most spectacular finds from Kul’ Oba, an elite Scythian tomb in the northern Black Sea region. The relief decoration shows two Scythians having their wounds nursed, a pair of men talking, and a warrior stringing his bow. It is thought that the scenes illustrate a Scythian legend.

Herodotus reported a story in which Scythes, the son of Heracles (a hero in Greek mythology) became ruler of the Scythians.

Scythes was crowned after managing to string his father’s bow.
The two wounded men must be Scythes’ elder brothers who failed the ordeal and whom the snapping bow must have hit on the chin and shin. The conversation scene either concludes the tale or shows Heracles setting up the test.

350–300 BC, Bosporan Kingdom
Kul’ Oba, near Kerch, northern Black Sea region
Gold
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Images © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017

**Image caption:** Scythes stringing his father’s bow.

**Image caption:** Scythes’ brothers nursing each other’s wounds, after failing to string their father’s bow.

**Image caption:** Scythes’ brothers nursing each other’s wounds, after failing to string their father’s bow.

**Image caption:** The conversation scene either concludes the tale or shows Heracles setting up the test.
A connected world

Duration: 2 minutes
This display is silent

Grave goods from a Black Sea cemetery
Between the 7th and 5th centuries BC, the Greeks founded several colonies in the northern Black Sea region. These objects were found in three Scythian burial mounds outside the walls of a 6th-century BC Greek colony at Nymphaeum. Showing the rich range of cultural contacts in the region, they include imports from Italy, Greece and Turkey, as well as Scythian objects and others inspired by Persian craftsmanship.

Hair spirals and gold necklace
The Scythian woman was found wearing this necklace decorated with rosettes, lotuses, acorns and gold beads. The rosettes used to show traces of colour. The shape of the eyelets suggests that the necklace was made to be worn by the woman when she was alive, rather than
made simply for the grave. Two finely decorated spirals discovered next to the woman’s shoulders were possibly worn in the hair, implying, if so, that she wore her hair long.

Late 5th century BC
Grave IV, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Electrum-covered bronze; gold
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

**Gold clothing appliqués**
49 tiny gold appliqués representing crouching lions were found scattered over the woman’s chest and body. Made by impressing a punch into a gold sheet, the lions would have been sewn onto a garment through the holes in the corners. In other graves such appliqués were worn in facing pairs, whereas this set simply consists of lions facing left. It is possible that this is only half of the original set.

Late 5th century BC
Grave IV, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
A connected world

**Mirror and libation dish handle**
These objects were found by the woman’s right hand. The libation dish may have been an Etruscan import from distant Italy. In the ancient world libation dishes were used during rituals to pour liquid offerings to the gods. It is likely that the mirror had a handle made of material which is not preserved. A sponge, wooden chair, pair of spindles and cups were found outside the woman’s coffin but these have not survived.

Late 5th century BC
Grave IV, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Bronze
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Torc, armour, greave and plaque
Grave VI of the Greek colony at Nymphaeum belonged to a Scythian male warrior. He was buried wearing this neck ring, scale armour and a pair of greaves. The greave, made of metal strips, would have been worn like a shin-pad inside a thick sock or boot. The armour, worn on the shoulder, has rows of metal ‘scales’ sewn onto a leather backing. An elk’s head plaque was also found, which is a classic example of animal-style art.

Late 5th century BC
Grave VI, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Torc: electrum
Armour and plaque: copper alloy
Greave: copper alloy with hide backing
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Silver drinking cup and bronze wine strainer
These Greek imports were found in a plain wooden coffin belonging to a Scythian woman at Nymphaeum. The strainer would have been used to sieve coarse wine decanted from an amphora. There is a duck’s head at the end of the handle. The drinking cup is a rare survival as most ancient Greek silver was melted down and reused. Potters in the Attica region around Athens adopted the shape of the cup and imitated it in black glaze pottery.

Late 5th century BC
Grave IV, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Bronze ladle
Found in the tomb of the male Scythian warrior, this ladle has a goose-head handle instead of the usual duck-head one. Ladles, a standard feature in drinking sets, were used to scoop wine mixed with water from large bowls into drinking cups. The ladle was accompanied by three imported pottery vessels from Attica in ancient Greece.

Late 5th century BC
Grave VI, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Quote on wall:

There is no people who would be able on its own to withstand the Scythians, if they were united.

Thucydides (about 460–400 BC), Athenian historian and general
Fired clay prism
Esarhaddon was king of Assyria from 680 to 669 BC. He had been nominated as crown prince despite being the youngest among his brothers. Having murdered their father, the brothers turned on Esarhaddon.

According to his own inscriptions, including this fragment, Esarhaddon ‘raged like a lion’ and ‘marched triumphantly’ to confront hostile neighbours who sought to take advantage of the chaos gripping Assyria. Among the enemies he defeated were the Scythians: ‘I put to the sword Ishpakaya, a Scythian, an ally who could not save himself.’

Behind the bravado, such extensive campaigning took its toll on Assyria. Esarhaddon must have been relieved to recruit the Scythians as allies in the wake of this hostile encounter.

673 BC
Nineveh, northern Iraq
British Museum
Clay tablet: a diplomatic marriage
By the 670s BC, Scythian raiders crossed the Caucasus into northern Iraq and threatened the Assyrian empire. King Esarhaddon of Assyria (680–669 BC) achieved a victory against this coalition when he killed the Scythian leader. The peace treaty that followed included a request from the new Scythian ruler, Bartatua, for an Assyrian princess in diplomatic marriage.

In this cuneiform inscription, Esarhaddon asked the gods of Assyria whether Bartatua would remain loyal to the treaty. The answer must have been positive, since the Scythians became valuable allies.

About 676 BC; Nineveh, northern Iraq
British Museum
1,2 Vases depicting Scythians

The gilt-silver vases are from burial mounds in the northern Black Sea region. One shows six Scythian warriors talking to each other, possibly recounting tales of their own history.

The other vase depicts hunting scenes. On one side Scythian horsemen are hunting a lion with dogs. On the other side two hunters are attacking a fantastic horned lioness. Other precious finds in the burial have led some scholars to believe this belonged to Oricus, brother of a Scythian chief mentioned by Herodotus.

4th century BC
Tomb 3, Chastye Kurgany, Don river region near Voronezh city
400–380 BC
Side burial, Solokha, northern Black Sea region
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
3 Vessel with fantastic beasts

This drinking vessel was discovered in the burial chamber of a Scythian chief. It depicts fantastic beasts preying on herbivores – imagery associated with the underworld in ancient times. The fine ornamentation and skilled craftsmanship tell us this cup was made by a Greek master. It was found with many similar items, placed on silver platters supported by bronze stands, close to the chieftain’s female companion. Scythian tombs often contain such vessels. We do not know whether they were actually used or intended solely for ritual purposes.

4th century BC
Kul’ Obá, near Kerch, northern Black Sea
Chased and engraved silver
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
4 Red-figured plate, signed by its painter

Scythian archers were known from contact with the Greek settlements on the northern Black Sea coast. They enjoyed a brief popularity in the imagery of Athenian pottery. Here, the archer runs while looking back and pulling an arrow from his quiver. He is identified by his soft hat, scale-decorated Scythian quiver and double-curved bow. The tight clothing and rounded cap are perhaps an artistic modification. The drawing blends the actual with the imaginary, to depict a Scythian who embodied exotic ‘otherness’ and the ideal of the skilled archer.

About 520–500 BC
Vulci, Italy (made in Athens, Greece)
Pottery, signed by Epiktetos
British Museum
1 Gold bowl

The gold bowl from a Scythian burial was probably made in the Persian empire, where this type of decoration was typical on precious metalwares. Similar bowls are shown on reliefs at the capital Persepolis in southern Iran, and Phoenician and Anatolian craft workers copied them in cut glass. The symmetrical handles are in the shape of a feline predator, perhaps a tiger. Very few gold vessels survive from this period because they were recycled for their precious metal content.

5th-4th century BC
Siberian Collection of Peter the Great
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: This bowl was hammered into shape from a sheet of gold. The X-ray shows that the handles, attached with rivets, are hollow and made of gold sheet. The seams on the handles indicate that they were made from two halves soldered together. © Trustees of the British Museum
2 Miniature representations of conflict

The Scythians were feared by their Persian neighbours, the Achaemenids. Symbolic battles between them feature regularly in Persian art, which contrast the sense of order within the Achaemenid empire with the perceived chaos beyond. Unsurprisingly, though incorrectly, they show the Persians as victorious. The chariot depicted on the comb ploughs into an unarmed Scythian foot soldier, while the Persian ‘royal archer’ on the cylinder seal fires at a battle-axe wielding Scythian.

Limestone seal: about 400 BC
Provenance unknown; British Museum

Reconstruction of wooden comb: 500–450 BC
Burial mound 6, Taksai-I, Kazakhstan
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana
Family label:

Telling tales
The Scythians were constantly on the move and sometimes fell out with their neighbours over territory. This seal was made by a Persian. It shows an axe-wielding Scythian and a crowned Persian in battle.

Can you see the animals?
Which is the strongest?
Discuss which side might have won.
3 Short sword with gold hilt

This sword was found in a high-status Scythian tomb. It has attracted speculation over its origin and date. The blade is typical of swords found in 4th-century BC Scythian burials, but the hilt with calves’ heads and a stylised palm-tree motif has Persian features. Was it booty captured by the Scythians, or perhaps a diplomatic gift? The absence of rivets securing the hilt to the blade suggests the weapon was not intended for use.

About 350–325 BC
Chertomlyk burial mound, Dnieper region, northern Black Sea
Iron blade; gold hilt
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
4 Silver wine pourer

This is one of the most famous silver objects to survive from the Persian empire. It was used as a wine pourer and holds 1.5 litres. The hole between the paws of the winged griffin was intended to allow the wine to stream into a drinking bowl. The griffin is wearing a necklace which originally held a coloured inlay in the centre. The top is decorated with palmettes and lotus buds with alternating flowers highlighted with gilding.

Mid-6th–5th century BC
Probably from Altintepe near Erzincan, eastern Turkey
British Museum
5 Ram-shaped drinking horn

This drinking horn demonstrates wealth and wide international contacts – it may have been made by a foreign craftsperson for a Scythian patron. It was found in a grave with other silver vessels and several pottery amphorae, originally filled with wine. Scientific analyses show that the outer walls and inside lip were originally gilded. The naturalistic style points to a Greek workshop in the Balkans, Anatolia or the northern Black Sea region.

Late 5th–4th century BC
Kul’ Oba, near Kerch, northern Black Sea region
Silver
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
6 Scaraboid seals

These personal seals were found in Scythian graves in the Greek colony at Nymphaeum. They demonstrate contact between the Persian empire and the northern Black Sea. Many seals imitated scarab beetles, but only the general shape of the insect is retained here.

One shows a rampant winged horned lion – a popular motif on so-called Greco-Persian scaraboids made in western Anatolia. The other shows a solar disc of Persian origin.

Scaraboid stamp seal: late 5th century BC; chalcedony
Grave V, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Ring-seal: 5th century BC; gold and glass paste
Tomb 19, Nymphaeum, northern Black Sea
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
The British Museum contains a hoard of about 180 objects which is known as the Oxus Treasure and dates to the fifth and early fourth centuries BC. It was found at Takht-i Kuwad, immediately north of modern Afghanistan, between 1876 and 1880.

Most of the objects are in an Achaemenid style, designs influenced by the area’s ruling empire. A few objects, however, are Scythian in style. Perhaps they were made by Scythians, or possibly by local craftworkers for sale or barter to the nomads.

Scientific analysis reveals the marks left by different tools, showing how the objects were made and whether they were cast or hammered. It also tells us that the gold composition of the objects varies. Some is from riverbed deposits where gold is found mixed with silver, and some has had copper added to it by a metalsmith to make it harder.
Image caption: Gold ornament in the form of a lion-griffin.

Image caption: This detail of the lion-griffin, magnified ten times using a scanning electron microscope, shows a granule of gold soldered onto its ear, while the horn has delicately grooved, or chased, ridges.

Image caption: Gold finger ring showing a winged lion.

Image caption: This detail, magnified seven times, shows that a blunt-edged tool has been used to chase lines on the surface of the ring, and another to punch a row of half-spheres.

Image caption: Gold roundel with a lion’s face.

Image caption: The raised areas of the lion’s face were created using a tiny hammer on the back, with details grooved in, or chased, from the front.

Images © Trustees of the British Museum
1 Gold headdress fittings
First thought to have been an ornament for a horse’s forehead, the fitting on the left is now believed to be part of a ritual headdress and resembles Persian goldwork with polychrome inlays. Prince Gagarin sent it to Peter the Great in 1716. The fitting on the right has a pair of long prongs on the back that allowed it to be securely fixed into a soft material. Part of the Oxus Treasure, it may have been made for a tall felt hat.

4th–3rd century BC
Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

5th–4th century BC
Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan
British Museum
Image caption: X-rays show that the griffin-vulture’s head is hollow. The object is made of gold sheets which have been hammered and grooved, or chased, and soldered together. One sheet makes up the animals’ bodies, and two more form the sides of the vulture’s head. Two sheets behind the wings hide attachment loops and reinforce the base sheet. © Trustees of the British Museum
2, 3 *Luxury items from east and west*

It is rare to find silver bowls at Scythian sites. This one has a long alphabetic inscription on the underside, possibly in an Iranian language. The silver spoon, probably a Persian import, was found in the burial mound of the ‘gold man of Issyk’, along with a vast number of gold ornaments. Combining Persian and animal style designs, this pair of gold bracelets inlaid with turquoise show predators leaping onto their prey. The luxury items suggest complex patterns of cultural exchange and interaction between the Scythian and Persian worlds.

2 Silver bowl and spoon  
5th–3rd century BC  
Issyk, south-east Kazakhstan

3 Gold bracelets  
Early 5th century BC  
Burial mound 6, Taksai-I, western Kazakhstan

   National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana
Image caption: The inscription engraved on the underside of the silver bowl is a mystery, although some have interpreted it as a southern Scythian dialect: ‘The vessel should hold wine of grapes, added cooked food, so much, to the mortal, then added cooked fresh butter on’.
© Trustees of the British Museum

4 Horse chest strap
Part of a Scythian horse harness, the chest strap was a precious object used by the elite. It is decorated with a woven procession of Persian-style lions and a border of foal hair with gold-leaf-covered leather squares. The material was dyed prior to weaving, using a combination of red and blue dyes to imitate purple, a colour indicative of high status. Judging by the decoration, the chest strap may be made from the reused hem of an imported Persian cape.

3rd century BC
Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Felt, wool, foal hair, leather, gold foil
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
5-8 Scythian-style objects from the Oxus Treasure

The heads of winged horned beasts with long snouts form opposing terminals on the pair of bracelets (5), their tails interlocking. The finger ring (6) is decorated with the profile of a roaring winged lion, its head reversed and legs fully extended. The roundels (7) would have been sewn onto clothing. They show boars, and the faces of a lion and a demon. The small curving plaque (8), possibly a bow-case attachment, is in the form of a stylised bird’s head.

5th–4th century BC
Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan
Gold
British Museum
Chinese cotton sleeve
This sleeve is from a large shirt which probably came to the Altai Mountains from south-east China, where cotton was grown and thin textiles were produced and traded. It is made of fine cotton, dyed red with pigment from the madder plant. The seams are decorated with cord and the cuff is trimmed with bright red lace. Such shirts are scarce in the Altai region and must have been treasured imports.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC
Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Cotton
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Cotton shirt with red-edged sleeves like the sleeve displayed here. Both were found in burial mound 2 at Pazyryk. © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017
Chinese patterned silk
This is one of the earliest examples of silk surviving outside China. Chinese imports in the burials of Scythian chieftains have only been found at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains. The multi-coloured fabric of this fragment was made in a traditional Chinese technique. Intricately woven silks were highly prized both in China and beyond, and even the smallest pieces were carefully reused. A considerable number of similar silks have been found in elite burials in southern China, where these textiles were produced.

3rd century BC
Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Image caption: The world’s oldest carpet, pictured, was discovered in burial mound 5 at Pazyryk. Over 2,300 years old, it is thought to have been imported from the Achaemenid Persian empire. The carpet depicts a procession of horsemen, stylised lotuses, griffins and deer, some of which are popular Persian motifs. Items such as this illustrate contact between the Scythians and their sedentary neighbours.
© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin
The Scythians, the first great nomadic culture to emerge from the steppe, were forerunners to the Huns, Turks and Mongols. Scientists and archaeologists continue to discover more about them.

Scythian supremacy of the steppe ended around 200 BC. Local tribes were gradually displaced and succeeded by new groups of nomads in the northern Black Sea and regions further east. New types of grave goods are found with different combinations of local items, imports and imitations. These indicate newcomers from various places who for several centuries coexisted with the indigenous population. Burial practices underwent significant change and incorporated both Scythian-style and new elements, until the old traditions ceased.
New tribal groups shaped the politics of the steppe over the centuries that followed. As forerunners to the Huns, Turks, and Genghis Khan’s Mongols, the Scythians proved to be the first of these great nomadic cultures to emerge from the steppe.

**Image caption:** Remains of ancient tombs dot the landscape of the Minusinsk Basin, where the Scythians were succeeded by new groups of nomadic herders who practised farming and fishing. Photo © E. Miklashevich

**Image caption:** Some of the main archaeological sites of the Scythian and post-Scythian periods in the Altai and Sayan mountains, bordering Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China.

**Image caption:** Ancient tombs surrounded by standing stone slabs in Khakassia, southern Siberia. Photo © E. Miklashevich
Chopsticks and painted bowl
These chopsticks are thought to be the oldest pair found outside China. They indicate that around 100 BC – AD 100 some people in southern Siberia abandoned their usual knives and spoons, instead aspiring to the Chinese mode of eating. The shallow oval bowl was made in imitation of Chinese lacquer bowls, and traces of red pigment on the surface indicate it was coloured red to mimic the appearance of these.

Bone chopsticks: 100 BC – AD 100; Ilmovaja pad burial ground, Transbaikal region, southern Siberia

Wooden bowl: AD 100–200; Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Family label:

Trend setters
These are thought to be the oldest chopsticks found outside China. They tell us that Scythians traded with and were interested in other cultures. Some of the Scythians replaced their knives and spoons with chopsticks.

What items or customs in your life come from other countries?

We hope you have enjoyed the family labels. If you have any feedback please email: info@britishmuseum.org
Musical instrument
Perhaps this 1,800-year-old instrument was played at gatherings, where stories were exchanged and music enjoyed. The instrument is played by gripping one end in the mouth and plucking the flexible central element with one finger. It vibrates to produce a sound. It has a long history of use across Europe and Asia, including the Altai region, where it is known as a khomus.

2nd century AD
Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Bone
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Lidded box
The birch-bark box is decorated with a lightly incised geometric design and representations of animals. In Siberia birch bark has been used extensively from antiquity to the present to make small containers as well as insulating roofing material and covers for tents.

2nd century AD
Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Birch bark
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Hair comb
Small hair combs are common grave goods at Scythian and later sites. Most were carved from horn or bone but some were made of wood. The small hole in the corner of this example was probably used to suspend it from a cord.

2nd century AD
Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Horn
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Plates from a composite bow
These plates were used to give compression to a composite bow. Doing so added to the bow’s stored energy and increased its range. This was a significant improvement to the ‘Scythian bow’. Composite bows were the most effective weapon of the Xiongnu, nomads who dominated the Asian steppe from about 200 BC. Their manufacture required skill and experience and could take over a year to complete. This bow technology spread rapidly and was soon adopted by the Parthians and the Romans.

2nd century AD
Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Horn
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Firing a composite bow.
© Kim Hawkins
A jewellery hoard from Znamenka
This hoard was discovered by chance in 1978. Its burial in ancient times might suggest a moment of panic during the unrest which was taking place in the region. Foreign items in the hoard show that people in the Minusinsk region traded far and wide. It contains beads and pendants of materials including gold, turquoise, amethyst, jet, coral and coloured glass. The coral was probably imported from the Mediterranean or the Red Sea.

The chemical composition of the glass shows that some beads came from the eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and India. The most precious items are thought to have been put inside a lacquer box before burial and the other objects in leather bags.

1st century BC – AD 1st century

Znamenka hoard, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia

Gold bracelet; gold plaque; gold and iron pins; silver button; silver plaque in shape of two trefoils; silver plaques with trefoil and horn-like elements; carnelian beads; carnelian pendants; pink coral beads; striped glass beads; amphora-shaped glass beads; pottery vessel fragment reused as a cover for the hoard

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Image caption: To produce these striped beads a long cylinder of dark-coloured glass was made, lighter coloured glass stripes were added to the cylinder and it was then cut to form the individual beads. © Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: Analysis of beads from the Znamenka hoard, British Museum, August 2017; the glass used to produce the beads was made using a combination of plant ashes and sand. Its composition suggests that it was made in modern-day Afghanistan or Turkmenistan. © Trustees of the British Museum
Affordable belt fittings
Belt buckles and fittings are commonly found in Scythian burials and those of later nomads. They were worn to secure the trousers that suited the nomads’ horse riding lifestyle. The material from which buckles were made probably reflected the wealth and status of the wearer. The gold belt buckles from the Siberian Collection of Peter the Great, seen at the beginning of this exhibition, contrast with these much more modest examples of gilded bronze and horn found in the burials of ordinary people.

2nd century AD
Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Gilded bronze, horn
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
An unexpected discovery

An exceptionally preserved cemetery at Oglakhty, north of Pazyryk, was discovered by chance in 1902. It belonged to the Tashtyk culture – a new people flourishing in the Minusinsk Basin in the early centuries AD. Excavation resumed in 1969 and the finds illustrate Scythian traditions being overtaken by new practices through contact with neighbours, immigrants and invaders.

These burials contain clothed ‘mummies’ with faces covered by painted plaster masks. Alongside them are life-sized dummies dressed like people, containing cremated human remains. Cremation was not practised in southern Siberia before this point and must have been introduced by immigrants.

The cemetery is now part of a protected national reserve but there is active archaeological research on sites across this region.
Image caption: Above: A stuffed dummy on the left and two human ‘mummies’ in tomb 4 at Oglakhty.
Photo: Leonid Kyzlasov, 1969

Image caption: Left: The painted-cloth face of the stuffed dummy from tomb 4 at Oglakhty.
© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin

Image caption: Below: View of the burial ground at Oglakhty.
Photo © M.P. Gryaznov, 1969
Man’s hat with funerary veil
This is the earliest example of a funerary veil in southern Siberia. A sable fur roughly stitched to the front of the hat covered the face of the dead man. Such veils isolated the corpse from the world of the living. The hat with ear-flaps, a pompom and a back-flap, is made of fur from a fox cub or puppy. Ear-flaps and back-flaps are common today on the headgear of Central Asian nomads. Their shape may go back to the hoods worn by earlier Scythian nomads.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia
Fur, leather, sinew threads
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Funerary masks on the head of a man (red) and a woman (white)
In order to preserve them, these fragile gypsum plaster masks were removed together with the individuals’ heads when they were excavated in 1969. Masks like these were used in the Minusinsk
region from the 1st to the 6th centuries AD. Their origin is unknown, but they illustrate the arrival of new funerary practices. Recent CT-scans show that the man’s nose and facial outline are similar to his mask. He has a reddish-brown moustache and pierced left ear.

Before applying a mask the deceased’s brain was removed and the eyes and mouth were covered with cloth. Layers of gypsum were poured over the face, the eyes and mouth were marked on, and paint was applied after the surface had dried. Some of the masks show signs of repair, suggesting considerable time passed between death and burial. Perhaps they helped identify the deceased.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia
Gypsum plaster, human remains, silk, natural pigments
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Image caption: The Oglakhty funerary masks cannot be removed from the heads without damage, but CT-scans allow us to separate them virtually. Computer imaging shows that the man’s nose and facial outline are similar to his mask. A stitched scar on his left cheek suggests either a lifetime injury or a deliberate mark of scarification (a form of body art using scars).
© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017

Image caption: Tattoos revealed by infrared photography on the man's body from Oglakhty, including an antler-like pattern, and a composite bow on his forearm.
After S.V. Pankova, 2013
Woman’s plait
This hair was found buried next to the woman’s head displayed here. X-rays show that the plait is woven around a horseshoe-shaped support of fur or leather. The bun consists of a fine plait twisted in circles. It has an uneven end which suggests that it was cut off. The woman’s head may have originally been shaven, with just a small bun left on the back or on top and the long artificial plait tied to the bun. Such hairstyles, kept in place with wooden or bone pins, are found in other burials.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia
Human hair with leather or fur
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Quote on wall behind you:

On getting out of the hole … and overcoming his alarm, the [shepherd] made a first inspection, only to be … sent fleeing by the sight of two corpses, one baring its teeth, the other hiding its face under a brightly painted plaster mask.

Report on the discovery of the Oglakhty cemetery by a shepherd who fell into one of the tombs in 1902
Log tomb chamber
This tomb from Oglakhty is constructed of carefully trimmed and joined logs. It housed a pair of desiccated ‘mummies’ with painted plaster masks. These were placed next to two human-sized leather dummies filled with straw, wearing clothing and containing cremated human remains. This is the earliest example of cremation in southern Siberia, a practice that must have been introduced by immigrants. Scientific analysis shows that the logs were felled in the late 3rd or early 4th century AD.

The tomb was found in a 1.4-metre-deep pit where birch bark covered the floor and insulated the walls and roof. The waterproof and antiseptic bark has exceptionally preserved the tomb’s contents. Log-cabin burials of this type were customary among the ancient inhabitants of the Minusinsk region.

Late 3rd – early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia
Wood: larch, pine-tree
Model bow case, bow and arrow shafts
This miniature bow case and quiver accompanied one of the male dummies burials at Oglakhty. The reindeer hide bow case has two compartments: one holds a bent branch imitating a bow, the other contains five arrow shafts. The rim is lined with fragments of highly valued Chinese silk with inscriptions containing good wishes for the owner. In the Minusinsk region of southern Siberia, the custom of burying imitation weapons with the deceased continued from the Scythian period 1,000 years earlier.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, Siberia
Fur, leather, sinew threads, silk, wood
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Man’s fur mitten and child’s fur coat
This child’s coat was found spread under the shoulders of the male ‘mummy’ at Oglakhty. Carefully sewn patches show that it had been repaired and therefore worn. Is this the deceased’s childhood coat which he had kept and which accompanied him in his burial? The back, sides and sleeves are made of sheepskin, the front is goatskin, the edges lined with kidskin and the cuffs covered with sable fur.

The mitten is a unique find from southern Siberia. Regrettably, the hair fell off soon after it had been excavated. The centre of the cuff was decorated with red-dyed leather. Fur blocks the unusually small thumb part, suggesting that the mitten was made for the funeral and was not intended to be worn. Similar mittens made of silk are known from the Xinjiang region of northern China.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia
Fur, leather, sinew threads
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Goatskin trousers and belt straps
These trousers, found on a male ‘mummy’, were worn with the goat-hair on the inside. Thin red leather straps with imitation buckles were discovered with them but had not been inserted into the trouser’s two belt loops. The removal of belts might correspond to popular superstition: in the world of the living, these were believed to protect their owner, but in the underworld their role is reversed. The pigment of one leather buckle contains Chinese lacquer, indicating trade links between Oglakhty and the East.

Late 3rd or early 4th century AD
Tomb 4, Oglakhty burial ground, Minusinsk region, Siberia
Fur, leather, sinew threads
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Landscape in the Minusinsk region, southern Siberia.
© Photo: E. Miklashevich
New research

Over the past 300 years, since the first antiquarian discoveries during the reign of Peter the Great, the development of modern archaeological techniques and the application of increasingly sophisticated science have enabled us gradually to reconstruct the lives of the Scythians and their successors. New research and discoveries are continually adding to our understanding of these early nomads.

Image caption: Conducting a geophysical survey around Scythian burial mounds in western Kazakhstan, 2011. This type of survey maps archaeological features, including structures and traces of human activity, hidden beneath the ground.
© Eurasien-Abteilung, DAI
After the Scythians

**Image caption:** A Russian archaeologist is shown in July 2017 recording Scythian rock art that is endangered by the water of a dam in Khakassia, southern Siberia. Archaeological rescue and research projects are carried out every year. © Elena Miklashevich

**Image caption:** Excavation of a burial mound at Pazyryk in 2017, a joint project between the State Hermitage Museum and the Altai State University, Russia. © Elena Stepanova

**Image caption:** Collaborative research and the use of scientific techniques are now common. Here a curator from the State Hermitage Museum and a British Museum scientist examine a gold object from the Siberian Collection of Peter the Great, August 2017. © Trustees of the British Museum
Image caption: An early Scythian textile is examined using a digital microscope at the British Museum, August 2017. Analyses of textiles and metalwork are shedding light on Scythian and other early nomad technologies.
© Trustees of the British Museum

Quote on wall:
The stories of the ancient peoples of the steppe continue to unfold, and astonishing discoveries are still being made.
Find out more

Events
Explore more about the Scythians through related events, from films and lunchtime talks to evening lectures and performances. For the full programme, visit britishmuseum.org/scythians

Shopping
Take home the beautifully illustrated book accompanying the exhibition (£40 hardback, £30 paperback), available in the Museum shops and britishmuseum.org/shop.

Eating
Combine your exhibition visit with a meal in the Great Court Restaurant. Russian-inspired dishes are available daily at lunchtime, and on Friday evenings. Afternoon tea is also served every day.

Join in online
#Scythians
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