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The Pazyryk

a 2500 year old knotted rug found in an icegrave in the Altai

Its Use and Origin

New York, 1982

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Photograph of the Pazyryk Rug



When it became known more than 20 years ago, that a rug was found in an icegrave in the Altai, where it had been buried for almost 2500 years, an edifice collapsed in the carpet world. It meant that the long cherished opinion, that the 16th century brought us the best of artistic carpet weaving, had to be discarded. Almost 2000 years earlier rugs were knotted that in fineness of weave and imagination of design were a culmination in themselves.

The rug to be known as the Pazyryk was dug up by Professor S. Rudenko in the V. Kurgan in the Altai Mountains in the Far-East of Russia, almost at the Chinese border. In this district were many graves of various sizes belonging to an aristocratic society that had been evolved by the Scythians over many centuries. That the contents of the V. Kurgan revealed such beautiful fabrics and works of art was due to the fact that soon after the burial, probably because the grave was reopened and robbed, water had entered and quickly turned to ice and so preserved the contents of the Kurgan in pristine condition up to our days.

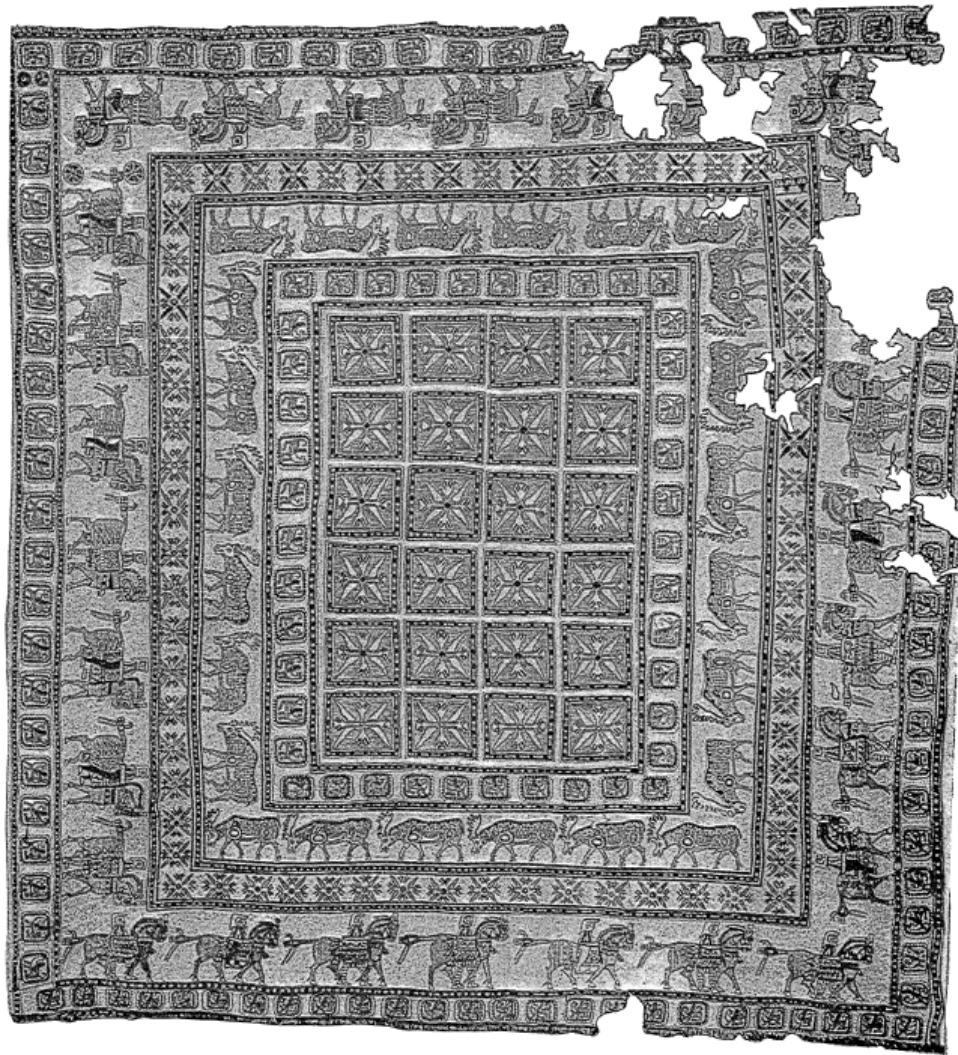
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Another explanation might be that the grave was reopened to remove the body of the wife of the King. Although it was customary to bury the wife with her husband her body was not found lying beside that of the King. Sometimes princesses of other tribes or nations, even of the Chinese, were married to Scythian Kings for political reasons and her own people might have opened the grave to rebury her in her homeland.

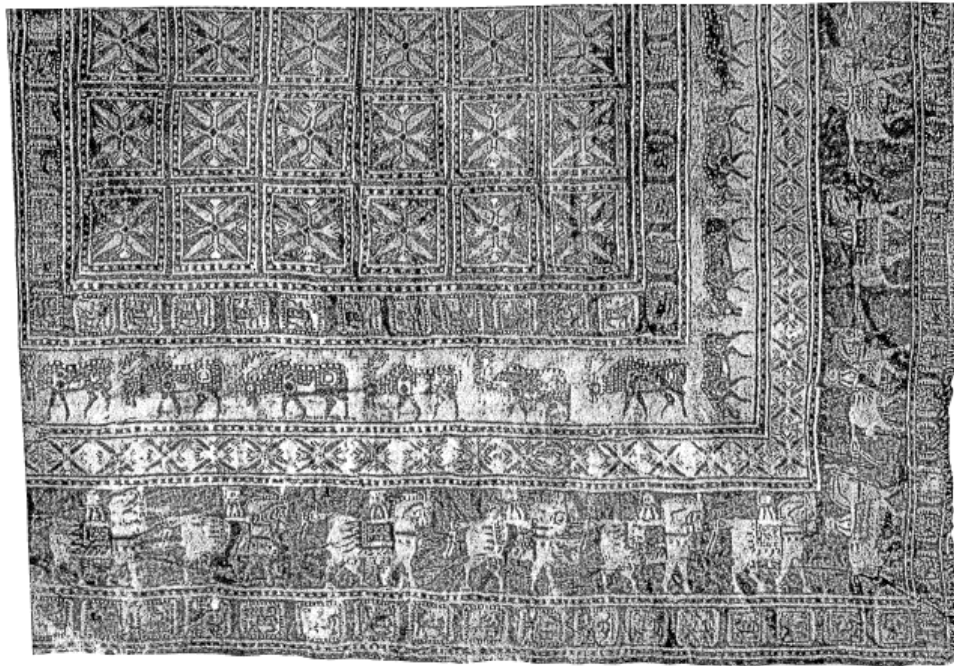
It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the Pazyryk rug was not an example of primitive rug weaving. It was conceived neither by nomads nor by peasants. Rather it is a highly sophisticated work of art full of meaning and symbolism and, at that, perhaps not even the culmination point of a period. Surely many hundreds of years of development had passed before a rug of so outstanding a quality and conception of design could have been knotted.

Since I first saw the rug in the Hermitage in Leningrad in 1962 (before it was put behind glass) the problem of determining its purpose and, more intriguing still, finding out where it could have been made has fascinated me.

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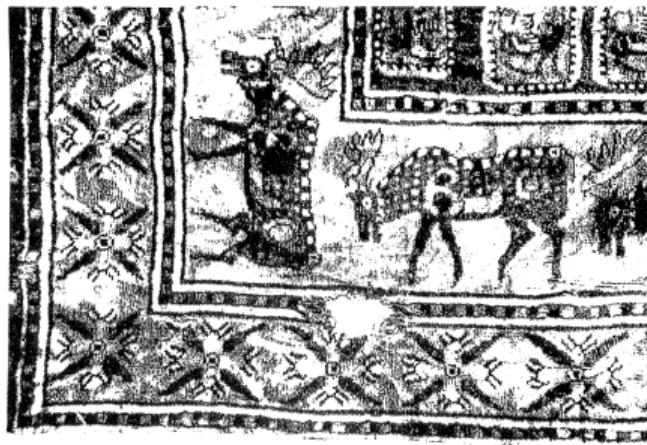
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I.

Description of the rug

The rug itself, which is almost square, approximately 1.83 x 1.98 m, consists of an inner field and a number of borders. The center shows 6 horizontal and 4 vertical rows of squares in which a cross-like ornament appears with 4 flowers with a little square in the center and 4 diagonal leaves. It seems to be derived from the Assyrian design of pine cones and lotus. This ornament is coloured yellow, light and dark blue. The field colour is red. The small, first, inner border consists of small squares in which eagle-like griffins appear on a yellow ground. The head of the griffin looks backwards and in the opened beak the tongue is visible, their body is red and the feathers of their wings are dark blue and white.



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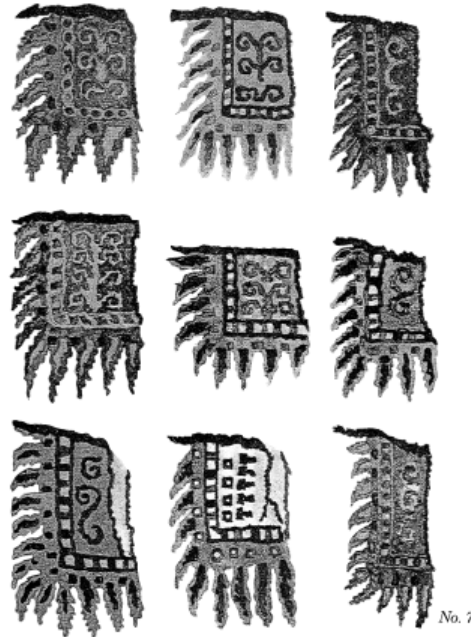
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The second inner border is a row of bucks all facing to the left, on light blue background. Their bodies are red with yellow spots. Yellow returns also in connection with light blue and dark blue in other parts of their bodies. Six bucks are shown on each side of the rug. At first one might think them to be elks, but a detailed study of the figures has shown that they are Middle Eastern bucks, the male counterpart to the spotted deer.

The next border shows a pattern of leaves and flowers very similar to the ones in the center of the rug. These flowers are light blue, dark red or dark blue, and are on a yellow ground.

The widest border shows riders on horses alternating irregularly with horses that are led and both in the opposite direction to the bucks, that is to the right. All are massive stallions of greyish colour with bent necks, on

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[12]

their heads a tuft of feathers, and their tails knotted together by a thick band. Their bridles are shown in details. There are no saddles. Instead there are covers made of felt, with tapering fringes, in a variety of patterns based, in the main, on a stylised tree design.

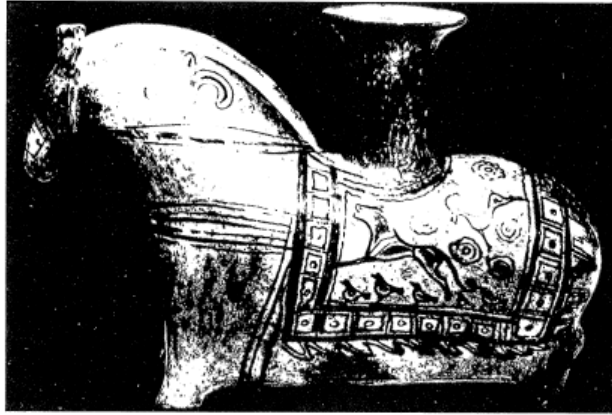
The riders are depicted very schematically. The ones on foot walk left of the horses, the right hand with the bridle lies on the back of the horse, in fact on the felt rug. The headgear of all the riders consists of the so-called *bashlik* that is fastened under the chin. The trousers of those on the horses are narrow and long. The background of this border is red, the figures of the riders are light blue, part of the horses yellow with white and blue, the band on the tail either in yellow, light blue or dark blue. The headgear is yellow-orange, the face white, the hands yellow and the trousers of the riding ones (except one yellow) are all blue. The people leading the horses have trousers that are yellow with dark blue, red and white circles and squares.

On each side of the border 7 horses appear. Their figures are on the vertical strip a little shorter than on the horizontal one. On one vertical border the last horse is considerable shorter than the others to allow a design to appear of two rosettes or circles. Similarly also on the top

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end another unusual ornament appears on the border between the bucks and the horses, that is the narrow border showing the flower design. This interruption of the design is an important factor that gives us a clue as to the purpose of the rug and it will be referred to later. The outermost border, like the innermost one, consists of griffins inside small squares but, in this border, facing in the opposite direction.

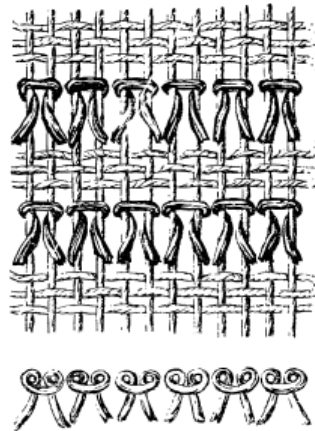
This alternating of direction from border to border will, as we shall see later, be indicative of the origin of the rug.



*Maku, Rhyton in form of a horse.
Saddlecover very much like the ones on the Pazyryk.*

[14]

The whole rug is made of wool, that is, the warp, the weft, as well as the pile. The number of knots is approximately 3.600 per sq. decimeter and there are 3 and sometimes 4 weft shots per row. The knot is of the symmetrical type usually found south of the Caucasus up to our times. It is by normal standards already a very finely knotted rug with beautiful silky wool and an astonishing variety of colours of which the onlooker is not immediately aware. A first glance reveals an unclear mixture of soft, if not to say, tired colours which give an over-riding impression of red and a yellowish pistachio green. One could imagine that the endless steppe across which the rug was carried until it reached the tomb in the Altai was mirrored in the rug.

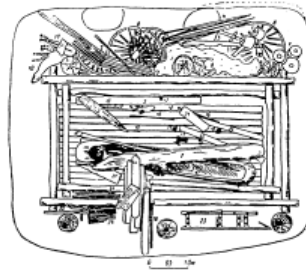


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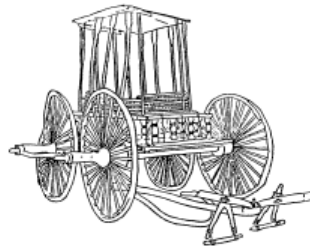
This somewhat lengthy description of the rug is, however, essential because it leads to the solution of the mysteries in it, that is, for what purpose it was made and what its design really means.

Kurgan V. – showing rug on dismantled carriage in separate chamber



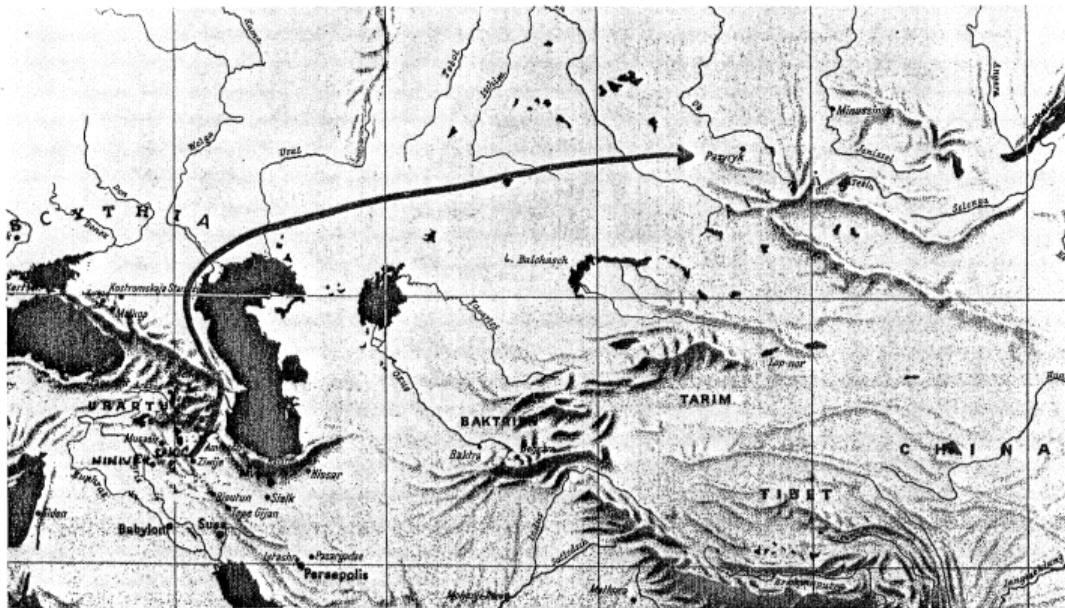
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Carriage could be taken apart for transport over mountains



No. 12

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Map showing the distance between Sakic and Pazyryk of more than 3000 miles.

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II.

The rug as funeral accessory

The Kurgans are usually divided into a main chamber where the dead are lying, and side chambers for the killed horses and the carriages. Kurgan V. has revealed the most beautiful and artistic textiles of the period and must surely have been the grave of a most important, art-loving, and universally interested King of the Scythians. The rug was not found in the main chamber but in the side chamber to the north of the grave on top of the dismantled parts of a 4-wheeled carriage. The carriage itself is unlike any other found in the Kurgans of the Altai. Its 4 wheels are more than 6 feet in diameter and parts of them were well-turned. That the rug was found with the carriage leaves no doubt to the conclusion that it was not solely a precious, private, property of the King, but that it always accompanied the carriage.

Herodotos, the great Greek historian and the oldest and best journalist that ever lived, gives us in \ABThe Histories\BB a detailed description of what happens when a Scythian King dies (book 4, chapters 71 and 72).

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No. 13 Decoration on a sword of an important person behind the King on a relief on the Apadana of Persepolis. The griffins are turning their heads back like in the Pazyryk. They seem to have the task to protect, here the owner of the sword, there the dead King.

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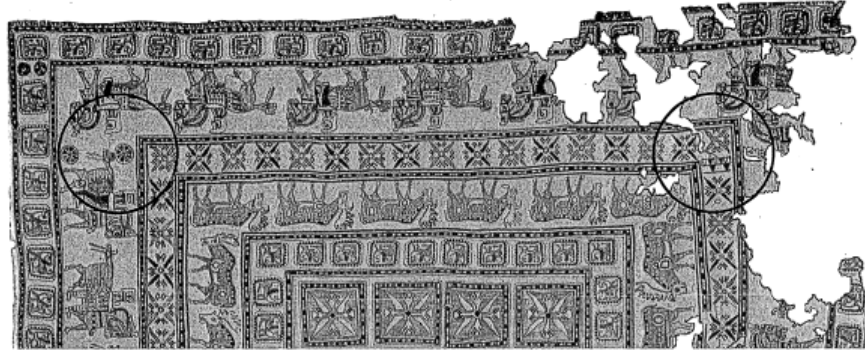
While a great square pit is being prepared, they take the corpse, which has been previously conserved, and put it on a wagon to show it to all neighbouring tribes within the Scythian dominions until they get to the traditional burial place in the Altai. No doubt on the long journey, which may take many weeks, the bodies of the King and his wife (who has to die with him) have to be protected against dust, heat, and the other risks of the journey. The measurement of the Pazyryk rug corresponds exactly to the measurement of the carriage with the dead bodies that lay on it.

A further clue to the rug as a funeral and ceremonial object is the design. According to the Scythian's beliefs, the buck and the griffin are mystical expressions of life passing over to death. Therefore the one main row of the spotted bucks and the two accompanying borders of the griffins are the

indication of the artist that the rug was meant as a funeral item. Indeed, in a neighbouring Kurgan masks which covered the heads of the dead horses making them appear like the heads of griffins and bucks have been found. It seems to me that it is the same idea that leads us to cover with a black cloth the horses that draw a hearse.

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Returning to the unusual interruption of the design of the main border of riders and horses, at first I shared the opinion of Rudenko that one horse was shortened inadvertently: The weaver, realising that she was shorter on one side of the vertical border than on the other, inserted two rosettes to fill the gap. This is a well-known method, used over the centuries by Caucasian weavers if the design was not correctly followed. In this case, however, this rug is no nomadic rug it is not a rug conceived by a simple weaver, on the contrary it is a highly sophisticated, extraordinary, piece of art. Consequently the last horse in the row has been shortened deliberately and the two motives are not rosettes at all but are wheels, and wheels of terrible meaning. Here again Herodotos gives us the solution of the riddle (book 4, chapter 72):



No. 14

[21]

\ABAt the end of a year another ceremony takes place: They take fifty of the best of the King's remaining servants, strangle and gut them, stuff the bodies with chaff, and sew them up again. These servants are native Scythians, for the King has no bought slaves, but chooses people to serve him from amongst his subjects. Fifty of the finest horses are then subjected to the same treatment. The next step is to cut a number of wheels in half and to fix them in pairs, rim downwards, to stakes driven into the ground, two stakes to each halfwheel; then stout poles are driven lengthwise through the horses from tail to neck, and by means of these the horses are mounted on the wheels, in such a way that the front pairs support the shoulders and the rear pairs the belly between the thighs. All four legs are left dangling clear of the ground. Each horse is bitted and bridled, the bridle being led forward and pegged down. The bodies of the men are dealt with in a similar way: straight poles are driven up through the neck, parallel with the spine, and the lower protruding ends fitted into sockets in the stakes which run through the horses; thus each horse is provided with one of the young servants to ride him. When horses and riders are all in place around the tomb, they are left there, and the mourners go away.\BB

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The riding horses of the Scyths were castrated. The stallions of the Pazyryk rug, however, were not castrated, because they were only meant to be killed and used as protection around the Kurgan.

The column of riders and horses, and the two wheels, therefore show the end of the whole funeral ceremony and the palisade-like design in the inner border of the flowers at the same upper end, as the wheels, should give an idea of the wooden poles that form the first protection inside the grave. The horrible dead figures of horses and riders form the outermost protection of it.

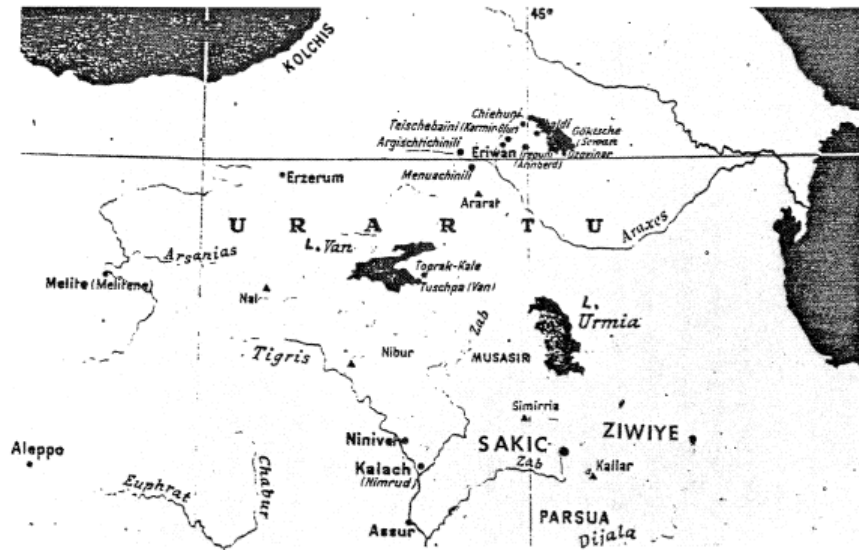
It speaks for the humanity, art-loving and world-wide vision of the dead King in the V. Kurgan that unlike other Kurgans where hundreds of horses were slaughtered, and the servants that were next to his daily life killed, only 6 working horses that drew the carriage in turn and 4 riding horses, probably the personal ones of the King and his wife were found in the grave.

The rug in fact is an allegorical copy of the grave. The center of flowered squares meant for the dead, the borders for the various protecting mythical animals, the main border for the guarding riders on horseback.

III.

The rug's origin is the Middle East

Since there are no known rugs of comparable age, the study of the materials used, of the techniques of weaving, of the nature of the dye-stuffs is a purely academic and sterile exercise. The sole criterion which is available to us at this moment is that of design for here we can compare what the weaver has achieved in her (or his) work with what contemporary craftsmen had achieved in parallel fields at around the same period in time, viz. approximately 500 B.C.



The finding of the rug among treasures of the finest textile works of that period, textiles that were collected from as far away as China and others that might have come from Hellenistic area and culture, suggest that the Scythian aristocrat was during his lifetime a reigning king or prince at the cross roads of Chinese, Hellenistic, Assyrian and Urartuan culture. Only lately have the archaeologists found proof of the importance of the state of Urartu and of its artistic achievements. Hans-Jorg Kellner, Director of the Praehistoric State-Collection in Munich gives us in his catalogue to a recent exhibition, an idea of the importance of the state of Urartu from the 9th to the 6th century B.C. Similarly, only a few years ago excavations have brought to light metal objects, especially buckles, that show the style of such people. It is a repetition of certain animals in a row, among them many that are influenced by Assyrian and later on even Scythian conceptions. If we want to locate the origin of the Pazyryk rug, we have to get back to the people who lived in Urartu and were conquered towards the middle of the 6th century B.C. by the Scythians.

One indication that the Pazyryk rug was made during the 5th century B.C. might be the combination of Urartuan artistic design with Scythian details, namely the horses which are the small and tough horses of the steppes, the dress of the riders, and the mystical aspects of the griffins and the bucks.

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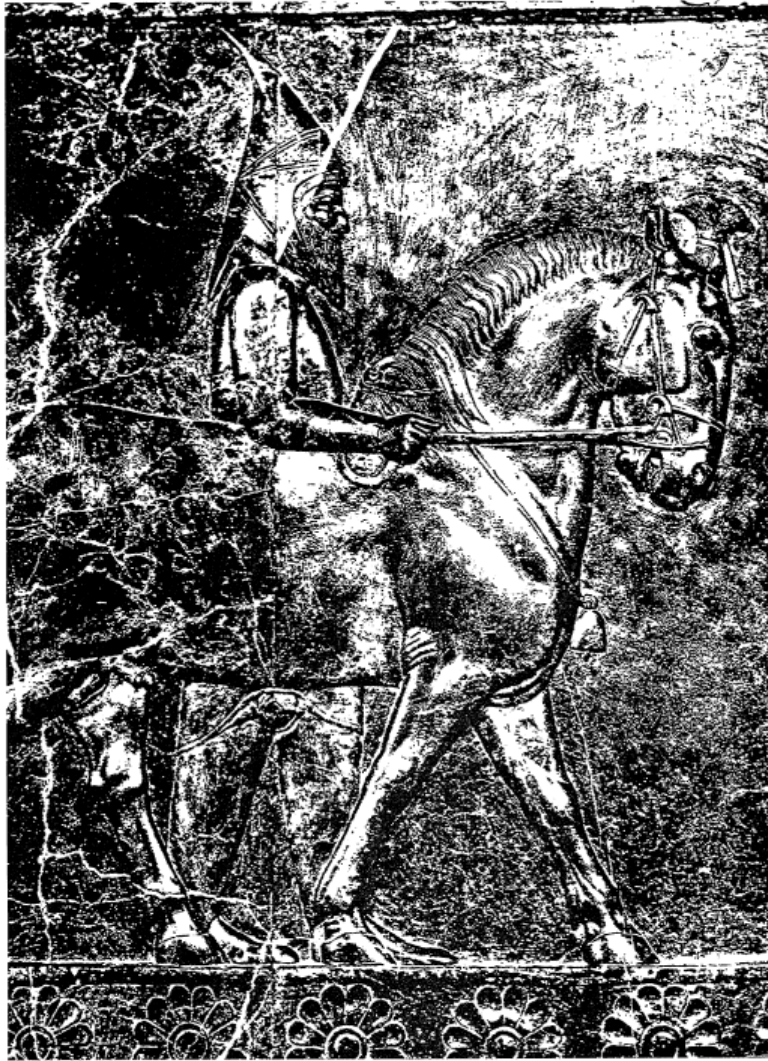


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No. 18

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To begin with, the headgear of the riders in the rug could not be found on any monument exactly as it is on the rug. On the contrary, the Scyths were recognized as people with pointed *bashliks*. The three examples of horses and people hewn in stone on the old palaces of Persepolis are supposed to be Scythians. Their small horses indicate the difference to the tall horses shown in the fourth illustration.



No. 19

[28]

It came to my mind that the *bashliks* shown in the Pazyryk rug belong to a tribe of Scyths that were resident in the former Urartu region and I have found two seals that seem to support my idea. One is a rolling seal showing a bow-shooting warrior on his horse. The other one, apparently a signet ring, shows a kingly personage on a boarhunt. Could it perhaps be the king or prince who is buried in the V. Kurgan?

Both seals have the style of the Middle East group of art and their Scyths have the same headgear as those of the riders in the Pazyryk rug. One more indication that the rug itself also was made in the same district of the Middle East.



No. 20

[29]



No. 21

Even the knotting of the tail of the horse is the same as on the Parzyryk rug.

A Scythian gold plaque, once given to Peter the Great, showing exact details of the same bridle that appears on the Pazyryk horses. The thick strap running from behind the ear and joining the main strap near the mouth of the horse cannot be found on the horses hewn in stone. In fact they have been left out from drawings and descriptions of the Pazyryk rug. The beautiful plaque seems to tell the story of a dying king on the lap of his crowned queen. Should the bridle trim of the horses suggest funeral rites?

Did they come to pick up the dead king?

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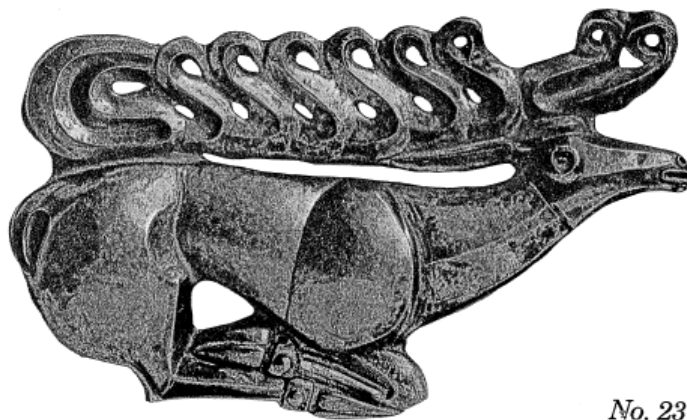
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The Scyths in the Altai itself were as far as we can make out unskilled in weaving pile carpets; they excelled, however, in making felt rugs of great beauty and variety.

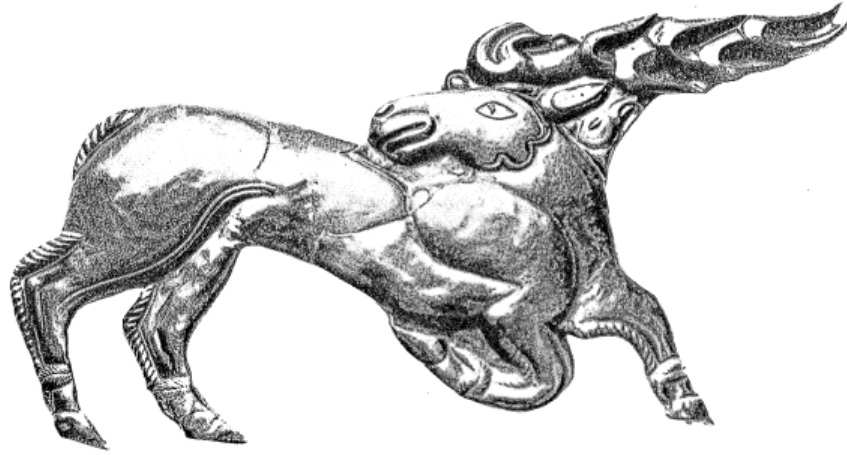
The animals in the Pazyryk rug do not correspond stylistically with the known artistic styles of the Scythians whose principal characteristic is one of great tension. This is most noticeable in their gold and wood work where strangely coiled animals look reposed yet still remain ready to spring (the following three examples are typical of what they achieved in gold).

In the Pazyryk rug, however, the bucks seem to be grazing mournfully, relaxed, and without tension; the horses trot along unexcited; all this belongs stylistically to the art of Middle Eastern world.



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No. 24



No. 25

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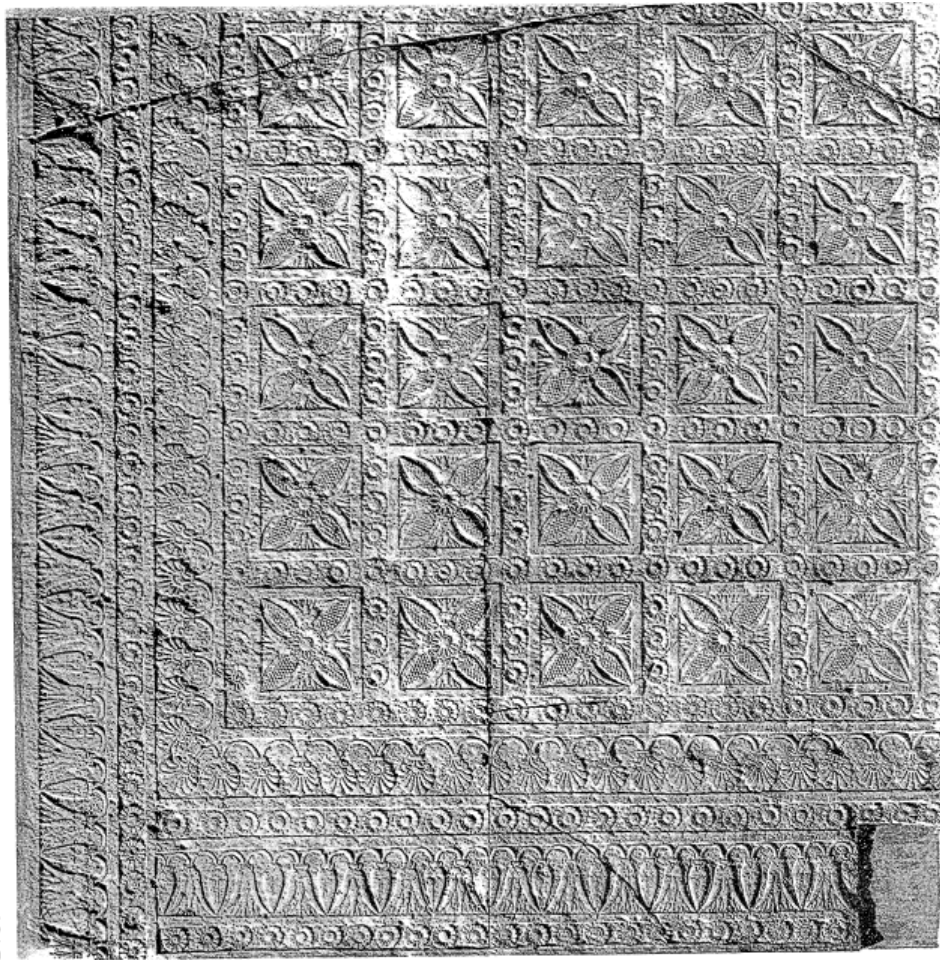
Since no Turks or Turkoman tribes existed in the Middle East, or the western part of the Altai, in the 5th century B.C.--indeed, they do not appear to get mentioned until a thousand years later at the destruction of empire of the Avars in 552 A.D.--I confess to finding claims recently advanced that the rug was woven either by Turks, or by Turkoman tribes, totally unjustifiable and therefore untenable in any objective assessment of the rug's origin.

Even without this anachronism Turkoman tribes would never have had the imagination to invent such a carpet design nor to use the small but important nuances as, for instances, the alternation of the riders with the leaders of the horses. This varies on each side of the rug. On the left side there are 3 leaders and 4 riders, on the lower end 5 leaders and 2 riders, one of whom is the only one in the whole carpet to wear yellow trousers, all the others are clad with narrow blue ones. On the right side there are, as far as the damage allows one to see, at least 2 riders and 3 leaders and, on the upper end, 3 leaders and 4 riders. Probably all this had a mystical meaning.

After the Kingdom of Urartu had been dissolved around 590 B.C. the population consisted of various tribes mixed with Scythians and out of this melting pot arose the nation of the Armenians. No one will be surprised if they inherited the magnificent attitude of the Urartuan people to art nor that products of sheeps' wool, which was plentiful in their country, allowed them to make extraordinary rugs. More than 150 years gave them sufficient time to develop their own style combined with copying such exact Scythian details as may have been ordered.

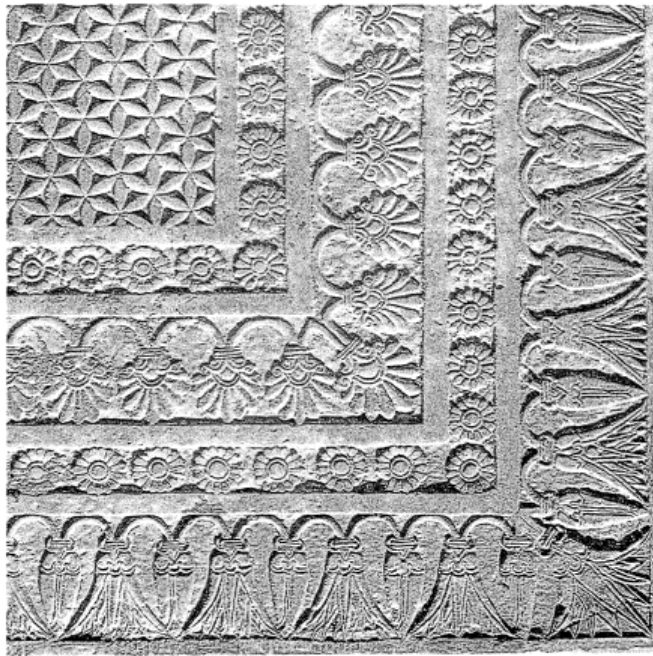
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Archaeologists have discovered that the capital of the most western Scythians may have been at that time the town of Sakic. Sakic is situated a little east of Niniveh and it is, therefore, not surprising that the rugs hewn in stone in the palaces in Niniveh have a great resemblance to the center of the Pazyryk rug. They were lying at the entrance to the private rooms of the king. In winter the actual woollen rugs were put on the stone.



No. 26

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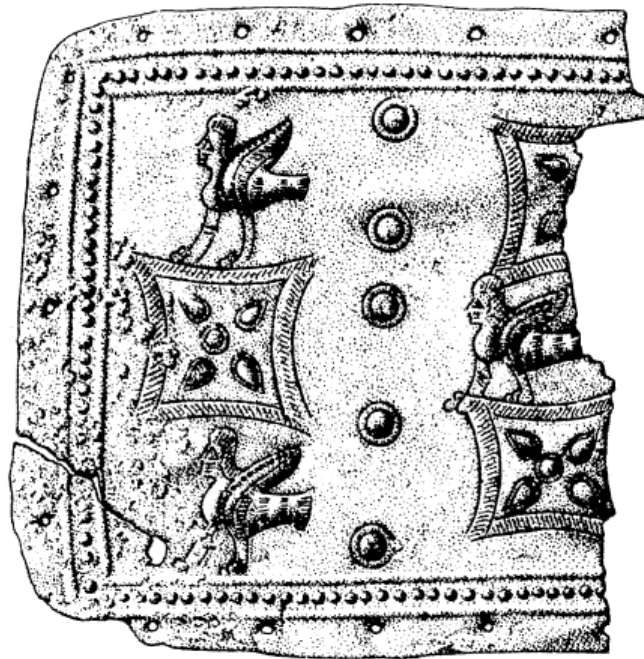


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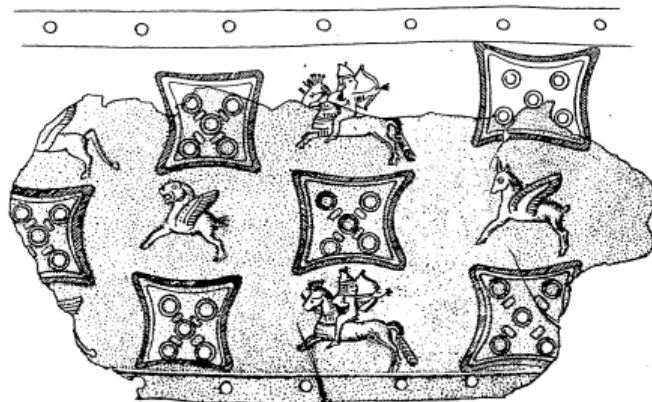


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No. 30



No. 31

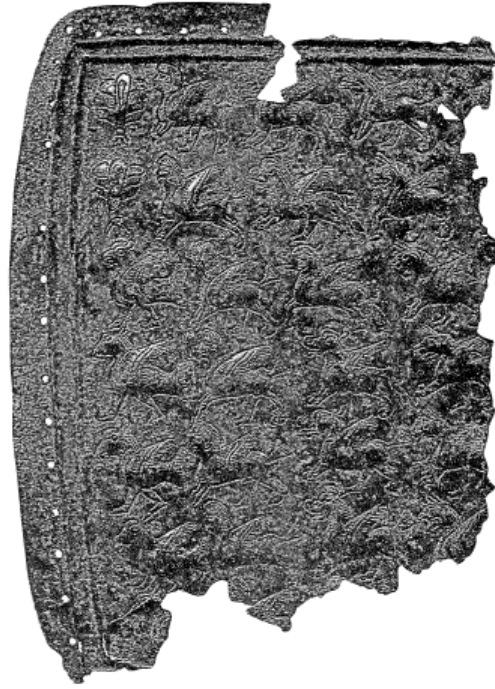
[37]

A buried treasure consisting of more than 2000 bronze plaques was discovered in the country surrounding Lake Van in 1971. The beautifully decorated pieces were sold by the \ABfinders\BB all over the world. Their decor adds further proof that the Pazyryk rug could only have been made in the same district. It is the same style of repeating animals in rows, often changing the direction. The Armenians lived there and as inheritors of the Urartuan art may have also have made many of those bronzes.

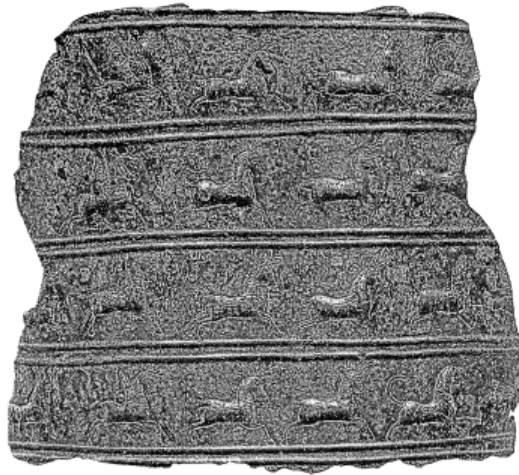
The next eleven bronze plaques give an idea of the finds near Lake Van. The illustrations we owe to the courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Munich.



No. 29



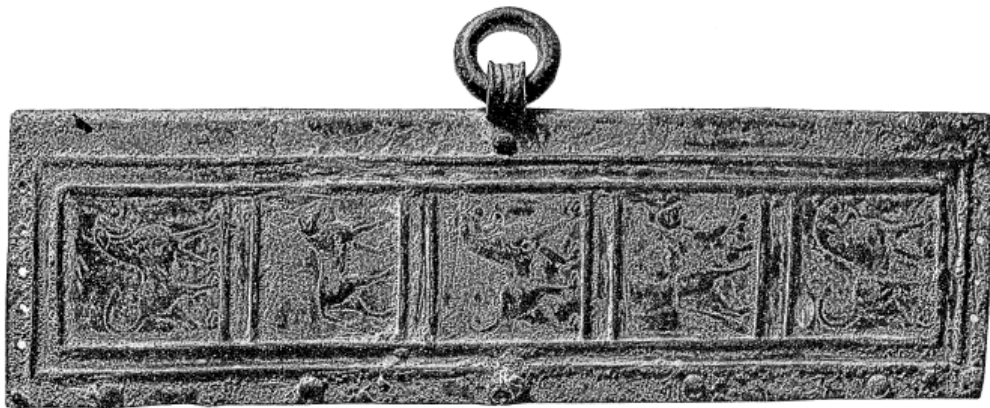
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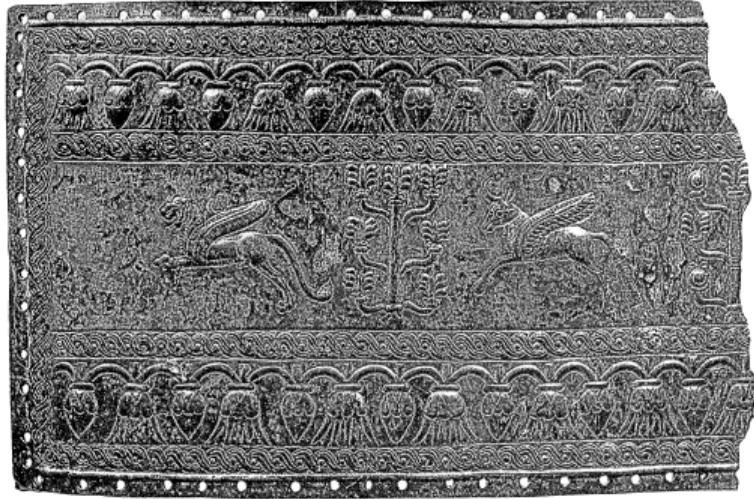
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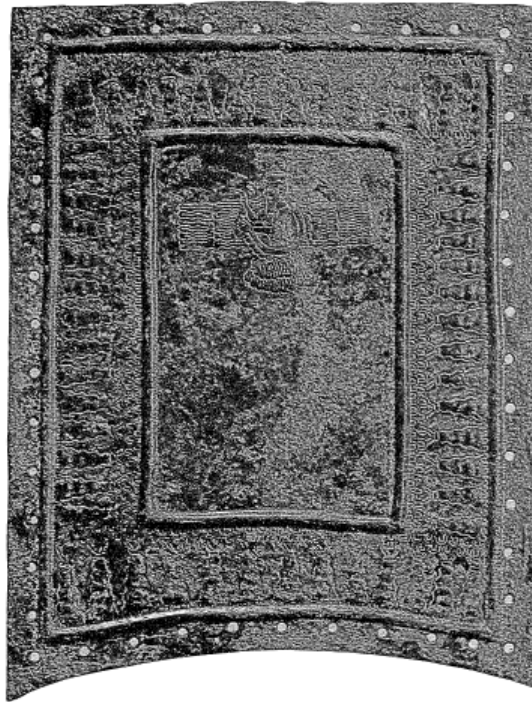


No. 36 showing the holy tree, which also appears on the felt covers of the horses in the Pazyryk rug.



No. 37

No. 37 and 38 the most interesting ones in design. In the center the same deity. The border of No. 38 is reciprocal as on woollen carpets. Should it convey the image of a carpet? The Museum in Van has a similar artifact of a man standing on a bull. It is supposed to be Ahuramazda who was also worshipped in Armenia (Ghirshman Fig. 278). He steps out of a winged sundisc and appears at times as the achaemenidic trias with Mithra and Anahita.



No. 38

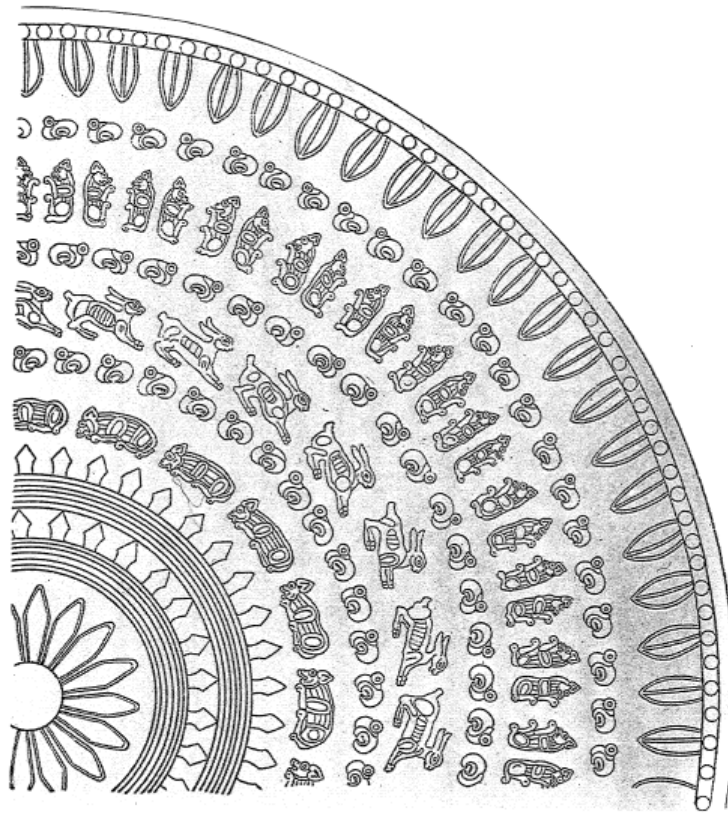
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That the region of Sakic was an important source of Urartuan art is further confirmed by the discovery of the grave of Ziyiye in which, among other metal work, a bowl was found with animals in rows of alternating direction. The artistic device of changing the direction of rows of depicted objects is not an invention typical of the Scyths. It is more likely an artistic device of the people of the Middle East. It gives life to the piece of art and saves it from being boring.



No. 39

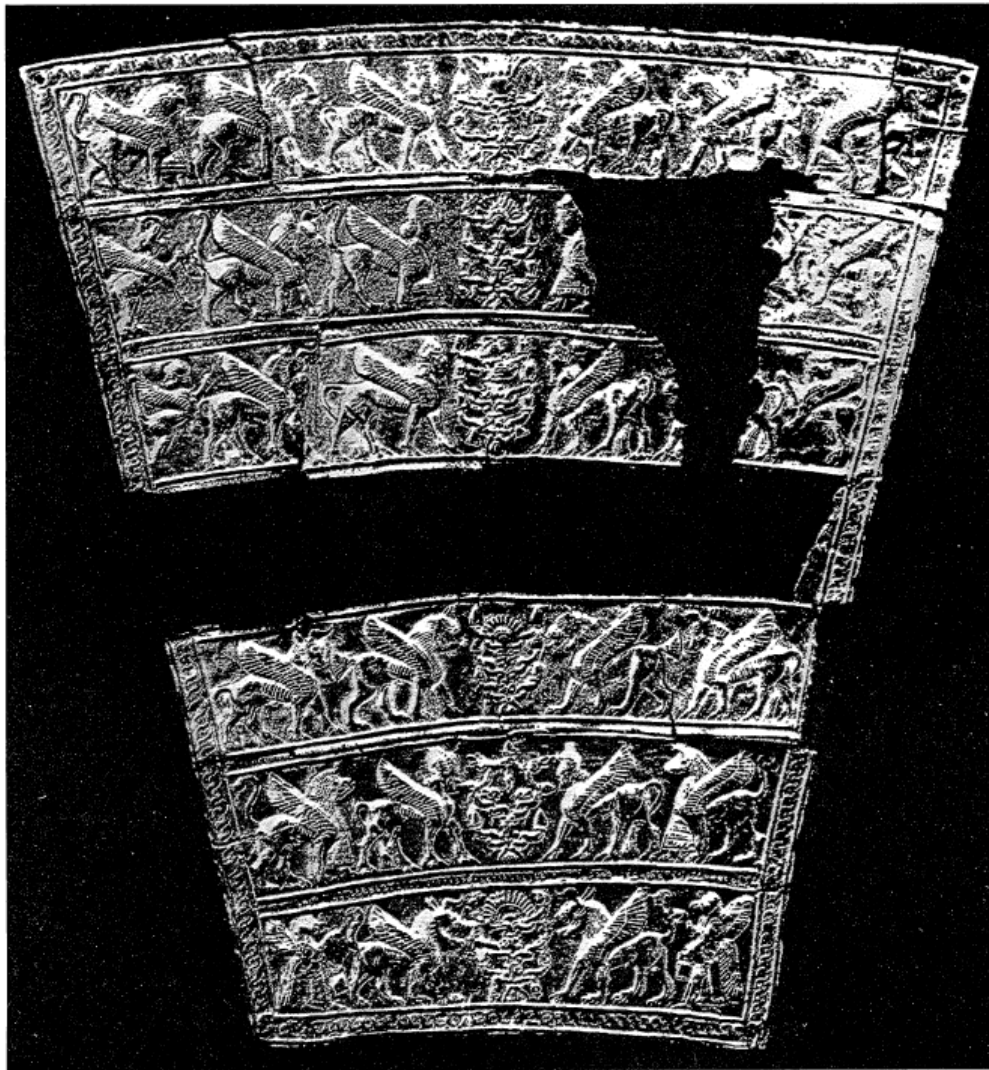
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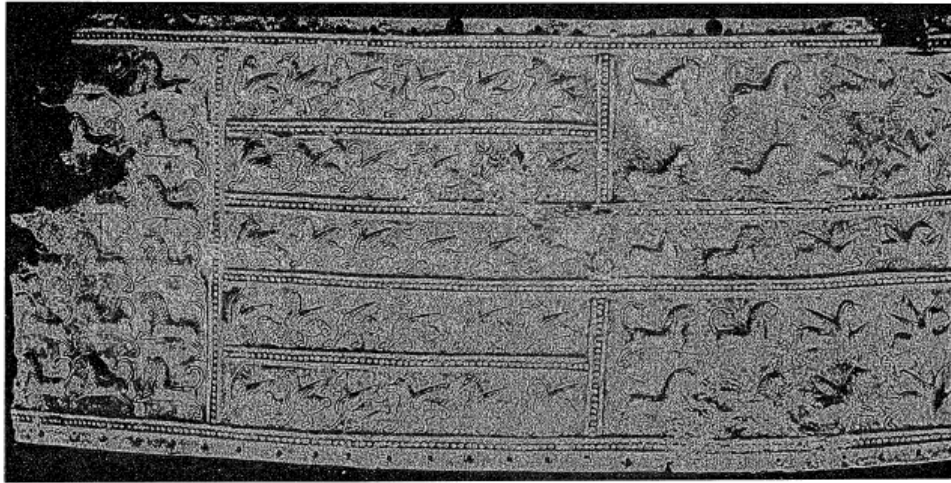
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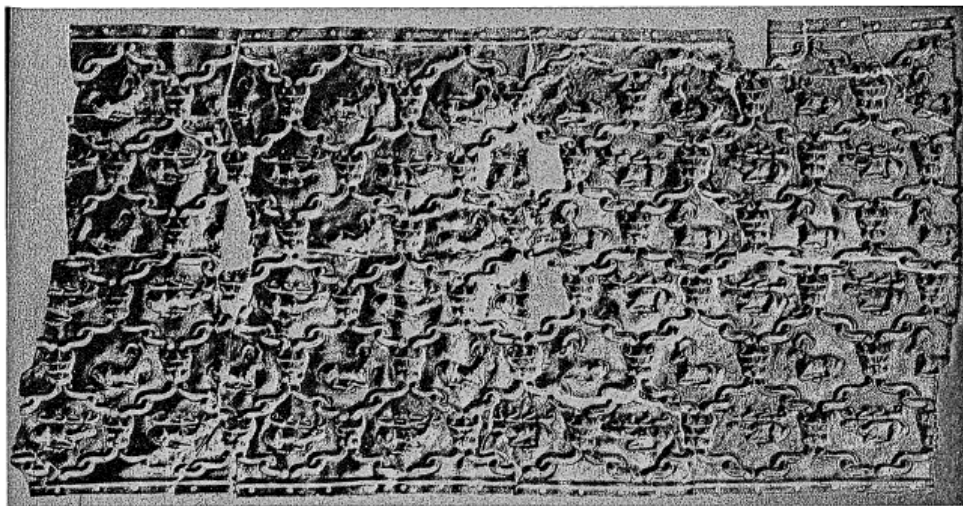
No. 41



No. 42



No. 43



No. 44

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At the time of making the Pazyryk rug, that is the end of the 5th century B.C., Sakic may have well been the abode of the king that was buried in the V. Kurgan in the Altai Mountains. He certainly was a cultured and radiant personality, living at the cross roads of the ancient silk-road from China to the west and the nomadic path from the vastness of the northern steppes to the Garden of Eden in the south. He may have ordered the rug years ahead of his death and the Armenians, whose influence at that time reached from the southern slopes of the Caucasus till the north of Assyria, will have provided the wool, the artistic conception, and the magnificent workmanship of the rug.

From all the evidence available I am convinced that the Pazyryk rug was a funeral accessory and most likely a masterpiece of Armenian workmanship.

Recommended literature for further studies:

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Braunschweig 1980
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