

## Article

# Predators and Prey: Cosmological Perspectivism in Scythian Animal Style Art

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**Abstract:** The Scythians, nomads who roamed between the Pontic steppe and the Altai mountains throughout the 7th to 3rd centuries BC, are well known for their iconic animal style art. Composed of vivid stylised representations of animals, but depicting few humans, this art poses a challenge to interpretation. The Scythians left no written sources to give insight on their beliefs, and scholars have often had to make recourse to non-nomadic Greek and Persian sources, but these sources are not without their issues. In this paper I will propose the anthropological concept of cosmological perspectivism, first developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as a new way through which to think about and develop a better understanding of what Scythians thought and believed about the animal subjects of their art. I will explore the importance of predators, prey, and the contest between them in both perspectivism and Scythian art, and demonstrate how perspectivism might help us approach these works. Turning to a number of objects that combine Hellenistic and Scythian styles, I will examine how they support a perspectivist reading and explore what they can tell us about how the Scythians thought about animals and how they used them to represent human stories.

**Keywords:** Scythians; nomads; animals; art history; anthropology; perspectivism; predators; prey; animal style



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## 1. Introduction

In the introductory essay of the catalogue to the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition *The Golden Deer of Eurasia*, Ann Farkas reflects on the difficult nature of interpreting the art of the Scythians, nomads who left no written sources of their own and whose surviving artistic and material creations are almost entirely composed of stylised depictions of animals and animal contests. Farkas cautions against a reliance on non-nomadic settled Greek and Iranian sources and mythology for understanding Scythian beliefs and interpreting Scythian art. "If one must interpret, then perhaps one should look for evidence of the way the steppe peoples thought about animals, to see whether modern ideas correspond to theirs" (Farkas 2000, p. 16).<sup>1</sup> To this end, in this paper I will propose the anthropological concept of cosmological perspectivism as a new way through which we might think about and develop fresh insights into how Scythians thought about and represented the world.<sup>2</sup> The concept of cosmological perspectivism was developed by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro from his study of Amerindian cosmology, outlining characteristic features, shared throughout the Americas, in their beliefs about personhood and the role predators and prey play in their representation of the world.<sup>3</sup> In particular, that personhood is a key perspective experienced subjectively by all animals, while the forms of predator and prey that unfold from this position are central to how the subjective person perceives and interacts with other creatures. Perspectivism offers the possibility of being similarly useful for helping us understand and interpret the animal dominated visual world of the Scythians.

In this paper I will firstly establish why cosmological perspectivism is an appropriate and constructive concept through which to understand Scythian animal style art, drawing on its previous use within anthropological studies of other Inner Asian nomadic and pastoralist societies, and examining the similarities between Scythian iconography and

perspectivist cosmologies, and their ways of interacting with and relating to wild animals. Approaching Scythian art from this fresh angle, I will suggest some interpretations of the narratives depicted in the animal style. I will approach a variety of Scythian animal style artefacts from across the Eurasian steppe zone, from the Pontic steppe and southern Urals to the Kazakh steppe and Altai mountains, dating from between the 7th and 3rd centuries BC. These include pieces of distinctive gold metalwork, but also wood and felt art, all excavated from burial mounds, known as kurgans. Among these works of animal style, many depict animal contests. Represented in gold and tattooed on the body, their pervasiveness attests to the significance of such competition in the world of nomadic pastoralists.

The contest between predator and prey is the central and archetypal relation in perspectivism. I will suggest that, as perspectivist creations, the depictions of particular predators, prey, and scenes of their relation of contest, which dominate Scythian art just as much as the perspectivist cosmology, serve as archetypal representations of predators, prey, and interpersonal relations. These may have represented predator-hood, prey-hood, and contest in the abstract, or have served as more specific symbols, even perhaps representing humans and relations involving humans. It is through the lives of animals, the relations of predator and prey observed throughout nature, and the archetypal images of these that the Scythians understood and represented their world visually. In support of this perspectivist representation of scenes from human life with scenes of archetypal predator-prey contest, I will examine a number of artefacts that combine scenes in the stylised Scythian animal style alongside scenes of human life rendered in Hellenistic naturalism, that we might think of as bilingual art works, utilising iconographic styles based in two different worldviews. The parallel compositions and weightings of these scenes, executed in two different styles, suggest a single scene represented from two different perspectives, the human scene depicted with Hellenistic naturalism, and its perspectivist significance rendered in the Scythians' visual language of animals.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Who Were the Scythians?

The Scythians, as commonly defined today, represent a variety of nomadic peoples who inhabited the Eurasian steppe zone from the Carpathian to the Altai mountains between the 9th and 2nd centuries BC.<sup>4</sup> Although spread across a vast temporal and geographic range, these peoples are nevertheless united by striking cultural similarities. Their nomadic pastoralism, shared burial practices, and most especially their characteristic iconographic culture together suggest a broadly common culture and shared system of meaning (Cunliffe 2019, p. 27). Being nomadic the Scythians are hard to pin down in the historical record. Most of what is known of their history and beliefs comes from the writings of contemporary settled people on the fringes of their range, mainly Assyrian, Greek, and Persian sources. Herodotus of Halicarnassus' *The Histories* (Book 4) and Pseudo-Hippocrates' *On Air, Water and Places* (Chapters 17–22) are the most important sources on the Scythians of the Pontic steppe, interested in ethnographic details beyond just their supporting role in the histories of sedentary societies.<sup>5</sup> They are still, however, settled sources that display and even project their authors' settled priorities and perspectives. Material culture thus serves as an invaluable source on Scythian culture and beliefs. However, nomadic pastoralist lives leave little archaeological record. A few defensive enclosures (gorodišče) have been found, but generally their lives left little material impact.<sup>6</sup> The exception are the many elite kurgan burials found right across the Scythians' range. Over five thousand of these kurgans have been excavated, usually located in mountain foothills and river valleys, and while most have been previously looted, there have still been many extraordinary finds and many examples of Scythian animal style creations (Cunliffe 2019, p. 292).<sup>7</sup>

### 2.2. What Is Scythian Animal Style?

Scythian art is saturated with animals, earning it the name 'animal style.' The Scythian animal style consists of stylised depictions of wild animals, predators and prey represented

in dynamic forms, often entangled in vigorous scenes of wild conflict. Nearly always, even when compiling fantastical composite predators, they are depicting, in whole or in part, the real animals and specific species which they observed around them. Some of the finest examples of Scythian animal style come from Peter the Great's Siberian collection, the first substantial collection of Scythian artefacts, assembled in the early 18th century.<sup>8</sup> These plaques and other body adornments made of cast gold display a lively animal style and many depict scenes of wild contest [Figure 1]; although some reveal the influence of Achaemenid Persian art.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the quality of these works, their usefulness in studying Scythian art is limited by their lack of context. Collected by treasure-hunters, having most likely been looted from kurgans, very little can be determined about their origins, although they are clearly Scythian. Mostly purchased for the Tsar's collection from locations in the Urals, these items probably originate from the Urals, from further south into Central Asia (some objects display stylistic similarities with the Achaemenid Oxus Treasure, from present-day Tajikistan) and from further east, perhaps as far as the Altai.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1.** Belt plaque (right) with scenes of animal combat (SHM inv. no. Сп.1727-1/2); gold and turquoise; Siberian Collection of Peter I; c. 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

Looting has emptied most kurgans, yet many fine items of gold and other metalwork have still been excavated in the modern era from the abundant kurgan sites of the Pontic steppe, in the Crimean Peninsula, and lower Dnieper and Kuban River basins. Many of these works reflect the influence of Near Eastern and Hellenic styles gained from close contact with the peoples south of the Caucasus and the Greek colonies on the Black Sea north coast. Hellenistic naturalism, in particular, frequently supplants the Scythian animal style with human and domestic scenes. Many items were even produced by Greek artisans for the Scythian market, although not necessarily to the exclusion of the Scythian animal style. Special attention will be paid to these works later.

Some of the most fascinating items, however, come from the Altai region. Despite looting, an abundance of works in wood, felt, and other textiles, as well as gold foil, have nevertheless been excavated here [Figure 2]. The density of the raised earth mounds has meant that they do not thaw in the summer, maintaining a permafrost since the time they were buried and preserving these organic materials (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 98). Even bodies displaying tattoos have been preserved.<sup>11</sup> These finds reveal the decorative world of Scythian material culture beyond the highest value gold items, and also offer a view on Scythian art away from the border zones with sedentary peoples, where it is less directly influenced by exterior settled styles and shaped by a different variety of fauna to the Pontic steppe. There are very few depictions of humans or domestic animals

here. Humans and domestic animals only really appear in artworks directly influenced by more naturalistic settled, particularly Greek and Persian, styles, entirely distinct from the predominant stylised Scythian animal style. This makes the meanings inherent in Scythian iconography even harder to penetrate.



**Figure 2.** Horse headgear (SHM inv. no. 1684/414); felt, leather, wood, gold foil; Kurgan 2, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; late 4th to early 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

### 2.3. Problems of Interpretation

In the interpretation of Scythian art, having left no written sources of their own, the writings of settled peoples have often been relied upon to decipher its meaning. Herodotus has been particularly heavily relied upon for his descriptions of Scythian beliefs, but when he describes the Scythians worshipping Hestia, Zeus, Gaia, Poseidon, Heracles, and other Olympians, although he says they had alternative names for them (Herodotus, *Histories* 4.59.), he is very likely projecting a Greek worldview onto them. He may even be describing the influence of Greek beliefs, such as the structure of an anthropomorphic pantheon as a way of representing divinity, among those Scythians in close contact with the Greek colonies. While there are a few examples of what appear to be Scythian anthropomorphic depictions of spirits from this border region, beyond the immediate influence of settled peoples Scythian art is almost entirely composed of wild animal forms as discussed. It is far from clear, and indeed feels far from likely, that Herodotus' descriptions reflect the beliefs of Scythians more generally. Many efforts have also been made to draw interpretations from comparisons with Persian and wider Indo-Iranian mythology and beliefs, such as the Rig-Veda, based on an identification of Scythian culture as being Iranian in origin (Farkas 1977, p. 124). Yet, it is far from clear that they shared this world of meaning.



The Scythians' world was nomadic and pastoral, intimately connected to the lives of animals, and vulnerable to predators, the elements, and intertribal raiding. It was a vastly different world to the agrarian and urban civilisations in which Greek and Iranian expressions of worldviews had developed. They were surrounded less closely by other people than by wild nature. The aim of this study is to suggest a new way of reading Scythian art beyond Herodotus or the Indo-Iranian mythologies of settled people from different times and places (although these may still offer some valuable insights), instead using the concept of anthropological perspectivism to approach the meaning of Scythian animal iconography.<sup>12</sup> It is my proposal that cosmological perspectivism will help us to start tapping into the world in which they saw themselves existing, into their world of being and thinking that is irretrievably lost to us, and so reveal to us new dimensions to the meaning of their art.

#### 2.4. What Is Cosmological Perspectivism?

Viveiros de Castro's anthropological concept of cosmological perspectivism describes a set of characteristic features common to Amerindian mythology and cosmology, as observed throughout the Americas, from the Amazon to Alaska.<sup>13</sup> It is principally concerned with how perspective shapes the way the subject perceives and experiences the world around them. In the cosmology of perspectivism personhood is perceived subjectively by all creatures. Personhood appears to all beings, whether animal, human, or spirit, as humanity appears to us—because humanity is the base form of every spirit (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 55–57, 83)—and the world unfolds from this perspective as it appears to us (Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 470; 2012, pp. 47–48). “The common point of reference for all beings of nature is not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition” (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 57). Animals and spirits see themselves as persons, and personhood is experienced, in their appearance and culture, anthropomorphically (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 47–48, 87). All persons represent the world to themselves with the same categories and values (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 107). They see themselves possessing human culture (Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 470). Tsimshian sea lions go to sea lion shamans, Rock Cree wolverines experience themselves using “fire, speech, and manufactured objects” (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 51). “Jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in the rotting meat as grilled fish” (Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 470). Animals and spirits perceive themselves constructing houses and villages, hunting and fishing, preparing and eating human foods, waging war, performing rituals, possessing shamans and revering spirits (Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 470; 2012, pp. 107, 143, 148).

Within the cosmology of perspectivism, the relation of predator and prey is central (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 53). An appreciation of this core paradigm will shine new light on the meaning, apparent to the Scythians, of their animal depictions. From the perspective of subjective human personhood, the rest of creation opens out as a food chain-like hierarchy. All other creatures are related to and represented as either predators or prey, with competition governing their relations (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 53). Just as every creature sees its own personhood as the same humanity we do, so every creature has the same perceptive relations towards others as we do; the images of prey and predator are universal. In Amerindian perspectivist understanding, snakes, jaguars, the moon and the Mother of Smallpox perceive humans as humans do their own prey, as tapirs and peccaries (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 107–8). To their prey, humans appear as the forms of their own predators, as spirits or predatory felines (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 47). Predatory spirits or animals see humans as prey animal, and prey animals see humans as predatory spirits or animals (Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 470; 2012, p. 47). It is through constant competition that these fundamental relations of predator and prey and the perspectives that accompany them are continually defined and negotiated. The competition of predators and prey quite literally defines the perspective through which every creature perceives the world.

### 2.5. Why Is It Relevant to the Scythians?

Viveiros de Castro developed the concept of perspectivism to describe the cosmology and mythology of the peoples of the Americas, but he has also suggested its plausible presence elsewhere. As far as I am aware, cosmological perspectivism has never previously been suggested as a category through which we might better understand the Scythians' worldview, but there is much to indicate that it would be appropriate and constructive to do so. Viveiros de Castro has proposed the presence of perspectivism in Asia and among other peoples who rely on hunting and whose lives are closely entangled with those of wild animals, specifically highlighting studies of the Chewong of Malaysia, Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, and Siberian shamanism (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 49). He has even suggested the presence of a perspectivist cosmology within Euripides' portrayal in *the Bacchae* of the disruption of perspectives caused by Dionysus' arrival in Greece, insinuating that Euripides is perhaps drawing on 'Asian' cosmology to show the disruption brought by the chaotic 'eastern' Dionysus and his followers (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 145).<sup>14</sup> Cosmological perspectivism has also subsequently been utilised by other anthropologists in their studies of contemporary Eurasian peoples.<sup>15</sup> In 2007 a Special Issue was compiled of studies by the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU) in Cambridge specifically on cosmological perspectivism among the peoples of Inner Asia, to which Viveiros de Castro himself contributed.<sup>16</sup> The majority of these studies concern Mongolian speaking peoples, but it also contains analyses of Tibetan and Turkic speaking groups, suggesting that perspectivism transcends specific linguistic and cultural groupings.<sup>17</sup> Cosmological perspectivism has also been utilised in art historical approaches before, although rarely to talk about ancient art (Davis 2018, esp. pp. 93–94; Desjardins 2017).

While cosmological perspectivism has been suggested as relevant for the anthropological study of current Inner Asian peoples, there is also much to suggest its relevance to the interpretation of ancient Scythian art. The Scythians had much in common with other peoples of the Inner Asian steppe, pastoral nomads whose lives were entangled with the natural world, with the elements and wild animals. Shamanism is a characteristic feature of beliefs and practices in both Inner Asian steppe and Amerindian societies, and is a distinct product of a perspectivist cosmology.<sup>18</sup> Shamans in both the Americas and Inner Asia are defined by their ability to adopt other creatures' perspectives, to see other creatures as they perceive themselves (as human) (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 59–60). This can cause them difficulties in perceiving whether another creature is a fellow person, a predator, or prey (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 75, 143–45). Shamanism may also have been present in some form among the Scythians.<sup>19</sup> However, it is the predominance of animal images in Scythian art (with the near complete absence of humans, beyond settled influence), and the central theme of contest and predation (to the almost total exclusion of other subjects), that is particularly suggestive of a perspectivist cosmology. Scythian animal art indicates that, like the world of other Inner Asian and Amerindian perspectivists, their world too is dominated by the wild, by predators and prey and their central contest.

### 3. Predators and Prey

The centrality of predators and prey in Scythian animal-art is inescapable, predatory felines and ungulate quarry are dominant motifs. The image of the recumbent stag is the most striking motif, recurring throughout the Scythian animal style. The stag is shown with huge, oversized branching antlers that extend along its back the whole length of its body, its thick neck outstretched, its head reaching upwards, exposing its throat, and its fore and hind legs folded beneath its body. The iconic 7th century gold shield plaque from the Kuban region north of the Caucasus [Figure 3] is a prime example of this depiction. With its large extended throat and great antlers this stag motif evokes the most striking features of displaying stags in the rutting season, when their necks engorge, often doubling in size, and their antlers are at their fullest development. It is a motif recurrent throughout Scythian art from the Kuban basin [Figure 3] to the Minusinsk basin [Figure 4] and Tarbagatai mountains [Figure 5], north and east of the Altai, respectively, and the Altai mountains

themselves [Figure 6]. There are many other similar examples from the Kazakh steppe, the Pontic steppe, including the Crimean Peninsula and the Dnieper and Kuban River basins, and other areas across the Scythian range.<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 3.** *Shield plaque in the form of a deer* (SHM inv. no. 2498-1); embossed and chased gold; Kurgan 1, Kostromskaya, Kuban region, Russia; second half of the 7th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 4.** *Plaque in the form of a stag* (SHM inv. no. 1293-198); cast bronze; Maly Telek, Khakass-Minusinsk Basin, Krasnoyarsk Territory, Southern Siberia, Russia; Tagar culture, 7th to 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 5.** *Recumbent stag plaque* (EKRM inv. no. КΠΟ93-38625); gold with turquoise and lapis lazuli inlays; Kurgan 4, group II, Eleke Sazy, Tarbagatai mountains, Kazakhstan; 8th to 6th century BC. [Author's image].



**Figure 6.** *Pin finial in the form of a stag* (SHM inv. no. 1684-154); leather, wood; Kurgan 2, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; late 4th to early 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

Coiled felines likewise strikingly recur, the suppleness of the cat captured in the stylised circle wherein its muzzle touches its tail. The 7th–6th century gold plaque from Peter the Great's Siberian collection [Figure 7] is a prominent example, with miniature versions of this discovered in the Shilitki kurgans in the Tarbagatai mountains, while examples also exist from the Pontic steppe [Figure 8], all formed into shapes approaching circles.<sup>21</sup>





**Figure 7.** *Plaque in the form of a coiled feline* (SHM inv. no. Си.1727-1/88); chased gold; Siberian Collection of Peter I; 7th to 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 8.** *Bridle plaque in the form of a coiled feline* (SHM inv. no. Кр.1895-10/2); cast bronze; Kulakovsky Tumulus 2, Crimean Peninsula; early 5th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

It has often been suggested that the stylised, exaggerated, and unrealistic nature of such depictions indicate the other-worldly nature of the creatures depicted, for instance that oversized antlers denote the spiritual nature of these deer (Farkas 2000, p. 13). However, it seems perhaps more likely that the artisans are simply exaggerating the stag's most prominent features, derived from observation. Those features, their antlers and the unique movement of their muscles, which capture the essence of the animal's body and its key characteristics and are the most pleasing to recreate and turn into decoration, with the potential to be represented with a variety patterns and shapes. Far from obscuring the physical animals, the Scythian animal style accentuates the representation of specific animals.

As well as the representations of deer and predatory felines throughout the geographical breadth of Scythian art, their images of prey and predators also take on a regional expression informed by the variety of species locally present. The deer in Scythian art probably mostly depict red deer, whose herds were present across the steppe, as far east as the Altai, although their features sometimes more closely resemble reindeer, herds of which were also plentiful in the Altai mountains and in the taiga forests between the Altai



and the Urals. It is also occasionally clear, from their large rounded muzzles and distinctive antlers, that they are depicting moose which inhabited the forests and river valleys across the Scythian range and lived solitary lives distinct to the deer.<sup>22</sup> Asiatic lions and Persian leopards inhabited the Caucasus, perhaps as far north as Kuban, but the Caspian tiger is the dominant predator in Scythian art [Figure 1].<sup>23</sup> Caspian tigers historically ranged between the fringes of the Pontic steppe and the Altai mountains, and they primarily appear in Scythian art east of the Urals.<sup>24</sup> Inhabiting the river valleys along which the nomads travelled and the taiga forests near where they wintered, tigers would have been an elusive and powerful presence in their lives. Snow leopards were present in the Altai mountains too and appear in Altai Scythian art as smaller unstriped feline predators. East of the Urals, big horned wild sheep, urials and argali [Figures 2 and 9], and Siberian ibex [Figure 10] were also prevalent in large numbers, specifically appearing in the Scythian art of these regions.<sup>25</sup> Steppe herd animals, like the Saiga antelope and the black-tailed gazelle, whose herds once numbered into the millions and whose migrations across the steppe rivalled those of the Serengeti, are noticeably largely absent.<sup>26</sup> A few depictions of Saiga antelope, with their distinctive proboscis noses, do exist, such as those from plaques off a golden vessel, dating from the 4th century BC, from Filipovka kurgan 1 in the southern Urals, an area which even today sees the largest concentration of migrating Saiga.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly they are depicted here in the context of a hunting scene alongside a human archer and his domesticated horse. Bactrian camels, wild horses, such as Tarpan and Przewalski's horse, and wild asses, such as Kiang and Onager, were similarly endemic to the steppe in herds of hundreds and are similarly conspicuously absent from Scythian art. In this way these steppe herd animals resemble the domesticated herd animals that formed the core of the Scythians' daily pastoral existence, yet are, like the Scythians themselves, notably almost entirely absent from their art beyond the works produced under Greek or Persian influence. Domesticated animals are nearly only ever depicted alongside humans. I will return to this point later.



**Figure 9.** *Bridle piece with rams clashing* (SHM inv. no. 3975-343); cast bronze; Khakass-Minusinsk Basin, Krasnoyarsk Territory, Southern Siberia, Russia; Tagar culture, 5th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 10.** Gold headdress ornament (aigrette) with a fantastical eagle predating on an ibex (SHM inv. no. Сп.1727-1/131); gold with turquoise inlays; Siberian Collection of Peter I; 4th to 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

For the perspectivist, personhood is a subjective condition, an experience shared by all creatures. To every creature some of their prey appear as deer, while some of their predators are seen as tigers. The bodily effects of every creature appear subjectively depending on the perspective of the perceiver, that is, their position within the predator-prey food chain. These bodies and forms, of ungulate prey and feline predators, are the universal appearances of all prey to their predators and all predators to their prey, universal forms of prey-hood and predator-hood. When an animal body is represented, it has more meaning to the perspectivist than the simple creature depicted but represents an archetypal form of predator or prey that is embodied, from certain perspectives, by all creatures. Thus, these images of predator and prey animals in Scythian art may represent more than the specific animals they describe (as previous interpretations of them as supernatural beings have also suggested), rather they convey the forms of archetypal ungulate prey and feline predators.

### 3.1. Wild Contest

Scenes of animal contest predominate Scythian art (Cunliffe 2019, p. 287). Indeed, the contest between predators and between predators and prey is the only clear narrative scene in Scythian art. While contest scenes are common in most ancient cultures' art (in part because of the prevalence of hunting), they are perhaps nowhere so singly dominant as in Scythian animal art. Represented in gold [Figure 1], leather [Figure 11], wood [Figure 6], and tattooed on their bodies, scenes of animal contest saturated the visual world of the Scythians.<sup>28</sup> Even the forms of individual animal images often suggest the predator-prey contest. To the perspectivist, of course, the body of an animal implies the perspective of an observer who relates to it as either predator or prey in a relation of predator-prey contest. Such a meaning is maybe also being conveyed in the composition of the works themselves, such as in the characteristic motifs of deer [Figure 3] and felines [Figure 7] discussed above.

The origin of these forms, and the context of contest they imply, can perhaps be seen in a leather saddle cloth applique from the Altai [Figure 11]. This piece, dating from the late 4th-early 3rd century BC, comes from Pazyryk kurgan 1 where it was part of the elaborate costume of one of the ten mares buried alongside the deceased male. It would have been attached to one side of a blue felt saddle cover, with the same image reflected on the other side. Similar saddle covers accompany all the horses, with eight of them also decorated with scenes of contest between different combinations of animals.<sup>29</sup> This particular cover depicts the combat between a moose (identified by its large blunt rounded muzzle, large hooves, thick neck and shoulders, and solid leafy antlers), originally covered in tin leaf, and feline predator (probably a tiger), originally dyed with yellow sienna.<sup>30</sup> The composition of both animals appear similar to their individual motifs. The moose is seen in profile, its legs tightly angled beneath it facing each other as it flees, its chin is lifted upwards, its throat outstretched, and its antlers reach down its back, all communicating motion as its body curves dramatically in response to the feline's bite to its hind quarters. The tiger, shown with its front half top-down and back half in profile, conveying its contortion, is curled, approaching a circle as it completes its pounce, twisting its abdomen to bring up its clawing back legs and complete its hold on the moose's hind quarters. Their forms strongly parallel and bring to mind the buckling deer [Figure 5] and circular feline [Figure 7] of the motifs.



**Figure 11.** Saddle cover showing a feline attacking a moose (SHM inv. no. 1295-250); leather; Kurgan 1, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; late 4th to early 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

### 3.2. Composite Creatures

It is worth here addressing the place of the fantastic-composite creatures that appear throughout Scythian art. Often they are depicted in the role of predators in contest scenes, and indeed they perhaps serve as similar archetypal symbols of predators, although of a higher order. To the Amerindian perspectivist, rivers, the moon, smallpox, even death itself, are all the forms of higher spiritual predators (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 100, 107). However, that does not mean they are necessarily disembodied. The spiritual is not separate from the single physical reality and is seen very much as part of the wild beyond the human domestic (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 123–24). The life of wild animals, and their perspectives, shape how humans understand and represent the spiritual (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 60). “It is common for the great predators to be the preferred forms in which spirits manifest themselves” (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 127). Spirits see us, as predator animals do, as prey and the predation of spirits on humans exists in parallel to the predation of felines on ungulates or other prey (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 127). As such, wild predators are always the prototype when comprehending and representing spirits. For the Scythians it would have been similar. Nomadic journeys across the steppe

are a constant flight from cold which poses as much of a threat to herds as predators. Both cold and tigers carry off flocks. Like spirits, predators are elusive, most often hidden in the mountains and forests and attacking in the dark. We can be fairly sure in Scythian art that when we see a griffin mauling a deer or a tiger with antlers we are seeing an apex predator, and there are few more fierce predators than the spirits; on the Inner Asian steppe incremental weather changes can leave potentially millions of livestock dead.<sup>31</sup> To portray these higher forms of predator, and higher levels of contest and predation, the Scythians used composite predators.<sup>32</sup> For Amerindian perspectivists, spirits are not characterised by disembodiment but by fluidity of the body, and composite creatures convey a sense of fluidity to the predator's body (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 149).

The Griffin is the most recurrent composite creature in Scythian art. Herodotus, in his description of the lands of the Scythians, tells a story about griffins that protected gold hoards far to the north-east (Hdt. 4.27), perhaps where the Greeks would have described the Urals. In Scythian art, griffins are frequently depicted attacking prey animals or in entangled combat with feline predators or other griffins. Three of the Pazyryk 1 saddle covers show griffins attacking Altai argali [Figure 12] and tigers (Argent 2010, pp. 166–67). The motif of the individual recumbent deer and the predating griffin is particularly widespread throughout Scythian art, from the Pazyryk burials [Figure 13] to the Pontic steppe (objects which we will examine in greater detail later). Despite being ubiquitous across Scythian art, their depiction very often seems to be influenced by Greek or Persian representations (although it is not entirely clear that this is a one-way influence). There is something of the dragon about the griffin in its combination of all man's primordial predators, the feline, raptor, and snake, the archetypal apex predator.



**Figure 12.** Saddle cover showing a griffin attacking a mountain sheep (SHM inv. no. 1295-150); felt and horsehair; Kurgan 1, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; late 4th to early 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



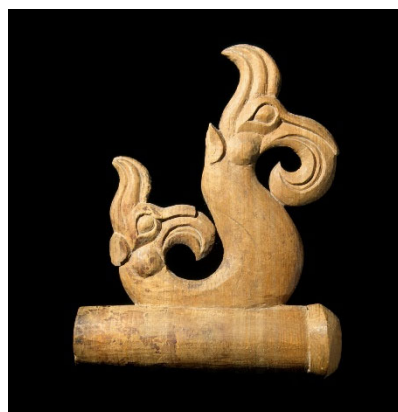
**Figure 13.** Finial in the form of a griffin holding a stag's head in its beak (SHM inv. no. 1684-170); cedar wood and leather; Kurgan 2, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; 5th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

Other composite creatures were the original creations of local imaginations. Slightly further removed from the influence of Greek and Near Eastern iconography, the Altai is especially rich with unique combinations. The 6th century antlered tiger from Tuekta is particularly striking [Figure 14].<sup>33</sup> Its striped body and long antlers, extending down its back as with the classic deer motif [Figures 3–6], are represented with the same abstract swirling pattern, the curling ends of which also mirror its large teeth and claws. All this serves to unify the composite body, depicting both the tiger's body and deer's antlers with the same stylistic texture, as though formed of the same substance, and giving the whole creature an otherworldly quality. It all serves to show the higher spiritual nature of this predator. Its great branching antlers especially indicate its more spiritual nature, reaching upwards to the heavens, tree-like, while ending in shapes that evoke birds' heads. That these end shapes are meant to evoke birds' heads can be seen in iconographic parallels from the same kurgan [Figures 15 and 16]. There are other more explicit representations in Scythian art of antlers' end points being shaped into birds' heads, including examples from Pazyryk kurgan 2 [Figure 17] and the characteristic 4th century wooden gold covered stags from Filippovka kurgan 1 whose antlers in particular also resemble trees.<sup>34</sup> Birds play a similar role to branching antlers, connecting the feline predator to the sky, the particular domain of spirits.<sup>35</sup> This object is a unique and distinctly Altaic Scythian creation combining feline, avian and horned elements similar to the horned and winged feline predators that appear elsewhere under Hellenistic and Persian influence.<sup>36</sup> Another original composite creature that combines these same elements [Figure 18] comes from the Tarbagatai mountains and again draws on local creatures. Like the Tuekta tiger its branching antlers end in hooks evoking birds' heads. It also has a large eagle's head with deer's ears (which frequently appear on Scythian griffins [Figure 17]) and ibex's horns, the front hooves perhaps of an ibex, and back claws of a cat or eagle, while its back legs and curled tail are those of a feline. Combined these bodily attributes serve only to enhance the creature's predatory status. A similar creature appears as the largest central tattoo on the mummified arm of the man buried in Pazyryk kurgan 2 [Figure 19].





**Figure 14.** *Applique of tiger with antlers* (SHM inv. no. 2179-912); leather; Kurgan 1, Tuekta, Altai mountains, Russia; 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 15.** *Bridle ornament in the form of two griffins' heads* (SHM inv. no. 2179-28); cedar wood; Kurgan 1, Tuekta, Altai mountains, Russia; 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 16.** *Applique in the form of four griffins' heads* (SHM inv. no. 2179-903); leather; Kurgan 1, Tuekta, Altai mountains, Russia; 6th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 17.** Finial in the form of a griffin holding a stag's head in its beak (SHM inv. no. 1684-169); cedar wood and leather; Kurgan 2, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; 5th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 18.** 'Hippogriff' (EKRM inv. no. КТЮ94-39409-39413); gold; Kurgan 7, Group IV, Eleke Sazy, Tarbagatai mountains, Kazakhstan; 5th to 4th century BC. [Author's photo].



**Figure 19.** Tattoos on the right arm of a man (SHM inv. no. 1684-298); mummified skin; Kurgan 2, Pazyryk, Altai mountains, Russia; 5th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

A beast somewhat similar to the Tuekta tiger can be seen in an object from Peter the Great's collection [Figure 20], a belt buckle depicting "a predator from the underworld" fighting a tiger.<sup>37</sup> The beast clearly has the body of a predator, but its head, with its pointed ears, long muzzle and upturned nose, is less feline than lupine if it is even meant to resemble a real creature. It again sports antlers that extend down the length of its back and end in explicit birds' heads. Entangled in combat with a tiger, this is a contest between predators, although the monster is clearly the higher predator, standing partially upright and biting down on the tiger's neck. All these objects seem clear depictions of terrifying supernatural predators, preying even on predatory felines. When seen through the perspectivist lens, they might be seen to represent, however ambiguously or specifically, various forms of existential threat in the person of spirits.<sup>38</sup> These 'spirits' are not ethereal but earthy, stitched together from real predatory animals to form monstrous, terrible creatures engaging in the same kinds of contest as other predators, but whose predation is an even greater threat than that of the visible predators.



**Figure 20.** Belt buckle with a contest scene between a tiger and an underworld monster (SHM inv. no. Сп.1727-1/11); cast gold; Siberian Collection of Peter I; c. 4th to 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

### 3.3. Contest: A Universal Relation

The struggle of predator and prey is a relation through which the perspectivist understands all interactions, both human interactions with animals and social relations. In perspectivism every creature sees some as prey and others as predators and is seen by some as prey and by others as a predator. Thus, the experiences of being prey (being predated) and being a predator (predating), like that of being a person (having human culture), are universal, shared by all creatures. As discussed before, the bodies of wild animals, predators and prey, are the physical forms in which all creatures perceive their own predators and prey, and thus their images can serve to represent the role of predator or prey, as experienced by all creatures, in the archetype or abstract. "The model of spirit is the human spirit, but the model of body are the bodies of animals" (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 122). Similarly, observation of nature reveals universal ways of representing and understanding life. Observation of the lives of wild predators and prey can be drawn upon to understand one's own life and experience as prey or predator. Just as human culture is used to understand and describe anthropomorphically the personhood of animals, so observation of the lives of wild animals can be used to understand and represent zoomorphically one's own predator-hood or prey-hood. The narratives of the wild can be used to portray human stories.

The main story that exists among the wild animals is the contest between predator and prey. It is the key relation in nature, as it is through contest that the status of predator and prey is defined and negotiated (and sometimes renegotiated). Every contest is a competition for whose perspective is dominant: the very representation of the world is at stake (Viveiros de Castro 2012, pp. 148, 150). It is also through contest that humans most often related to and interacted with wild animals (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 59). Human nomads live in near constant contest with the wild, whether hunting, protecting their flocks from predation, domesticating horses, pursuing better pastures or a better climate for their flocks, battling disease, or otherwise facing the predation of higher spirits.<sup>39</sup> As Barry Cunliffe says, “life’s struggle was ever present: it was the very essence of being and it is no surprise that it became a central theme in Scythian art” (Cunliffe 2019, p. 283). The competition of the tiger and deer is a universal way of interacting and relating, an archetypal narrative running through creation, it is therefore through the narrative of wild contest that perspectivists come to understand and represent all forms of interspecies relation and a great manner of interpersonal interactions.

Interpreting the Scythian animal style as the product of perspectivism highlights the potential that in the repetitive, although incredibly varied, scenes of predator-prey conflict they are portraying more than just the particular animals and scenes depicted, but that they are representing, with purposeful ambiguity, a whole range of contests in the abstract or, alternatively, that they are seeking to portray specific narratives from their lives and cosmology in a language of archetypal animals. The lack of people in Scythian art could well suggest that they are illustrating, again abstractly or specifically, scenes from their own human and domestic world, such as pastoral activities, their own predation on animals, their conflicts with other tribes and people, or their struggles against their own predators, both animals and spirits.

These scenes perhaps have a special significance in the context of the burial. While they show a struggle experienced throughout life, this struggle finds its personal culmination in death. It is too often assumed that such burial goods are intended primarily to accompany the deceased into the afterlife, and indeed that the presence of burial goods, and in particular the humans and horses so often found killed and buried in Scythian burials, indicate a strong belief in the afterlife. It is far from clear that Scythian burial practices indicate such beliefs.<sup>40</sup> To the perspectivist, death is a “bodily catastrophe” fundamentally dislocating the spirit from embodiment and, to an extent, from the human personhood that all creatures perceive their spirits as possessing (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 128). The perspectivist holds out no hope in an embodied afterlife. Death is a loss of contest and a tragedy for the deceased nomadic leader’s followers. Such burial goods may also serve a purely illustrative, dramatic, and performative function in the burial. Neil Price has suggested, in relation to the ‘Rus’ ship burial on the banks of the Volga River, described by Ibn Fadlan in the 10th century AD, which included the brutal ritual killing of a human and several animals, that the composition of the burial served the more immediate purpose of viscerally acting out a tragedy.<sup>41</sup> Scythian burials offer a comparable scene, the deceased often surrounded by slaughtered servants and horses, the whole burial adorned with vigorous scenes of wild struggle.

There is an ambiguity and a universality in the images with which the community chose to adorn their display of tragedy. In the images of contest, we might see scenes of the deceased’s own ‘predation’ over wild animals and domestic flocks, and victories over predators, enemies, and other wild forces. In the depiction of individual animals not locked in contest, of prey animals such as deer and mountain goats, the predatory perspective of the human is implied. However, these scenes of contest might also speak of the deceased’s fall at the hands of their own predators. Again, in individual images of tigers, griffins and spirits, the human viewer’s prey status is in contrast confirmed. Indeed, there is perhaps a purposeful ambiguity between these two perspectives. The deceased’s own victories foreshadow their own demise. All the victories are tinged with the bitterness of their final temporariness. The contest of predator and prey is in the end the same fundamental

mythical scene that is enacted out throughout human life from many different perspectives. In the burial context the contest scenes, then, may illustrate the tragedy of the dead human's loss of contest, succumbing to their status as prey, although also commemorating their triumphs as predator. Yet, while these scenes of contest may have had special significance in illustrating the tragedy of the burial, tattoos in particular [Figure 19] indicate that such motifs of contest were not limited to the burial but accompanied the Scythians throughout their lives.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. Greek Art

##### 4.1. Mesopotamian Influence

In support of the perspectivist reading so far outlined, I will turn in this last section to examine several specific objects of Scythian art that contain both Greek and Scythian stylistic influence, juxtaposing and paralleling scenes of Scythian animal style and Hellenistic naturalism. That the Scythians are reflecting and representing aspects of human society and experience in their art, through the archetypal symbols and universal narratives of the wild, may be implied through the ways in which humans do appear in Scythian art as a result of these exterior settled artistic influences. A perspectivist reading of these objects can perhaps also shed light on the kind of human scenes Scythian art may have intended to represent.

Despite the general lack of people depicted in Scythian art, scenes of human life and warfare do appear, alongside scenes of animal contest, in works produced in the contact zones with settled peoples, under the influence of non-nomadic artistic styles. A number of works from the Kelermes kurgans in the Trans-Kuban region north of the Caucasus, dating from the 7th century BC, demonstrate the influence of a Mesopotamian Assyrian-Hurrian iconographic style, specifically derived from close contact with the Urartian or Biainili kingdom (9th to 7th century BC) of the south Caucasus.<sup>43</sup> A silver mirror [Figure 21] is divided into eight separate scenes, all executed in a Mesopotamian style while also displaying the preoccupations of their Scythian audience. In one panel an anthropomorphic winged goddess holds a pair of defeated lions by the paws, while in the segment directly opposite, two hair covered men with distinctly Mesopotamian beards and hair wrestle a horned and winged feline. A pair of human headed sphinxes appear in two of the segments, opposite from each other, and lions, which are much more common in Near Eastern than Scythian art, appear in many of the segments. Yet, there are animals more common to Scythian art too, such as a griffin below one of the sphinx pairs, a semi coiled feline in the segment opposite (paralleling [Figure 7]), and a recumbent ibex (paralleling [Figure 10]) and mountain sheep (paralleling [Figure 5]), the ibex below a scene of lions fighting, the sheep, opposite, below a single striding lion. The whole composition, with opposite segments containing similarly weighted scenes of parallel subjects, offers the distinct sense of possessing a more intricate meaning, one that may have been readily apparent to a Scythian, concerning the positioning, perhaps reflecting the hierarchy of predators, prey, humans, and spirits. This is probably impenetrable to us, but we are still left with the overall effect of different scenes of contest, rendered in a Mesopotamian style, mostly depicting animals, but with a number of iconographically Mesopotamian humans and anthropomorphic deities and creatures.

The gold handle and head setting of a battle-axe from Kelermes is entirely decorated with animals, many in the Urartian style mixed with others possessing distinctively Scythian forms, such as the recumbent stags.<sup>44</sup> A gold scabbard for a sword [Figure 22] from Kelermes has a very close parallel [Figure 23], also from the 7th century, from a kurgan in Melgunov, close to the Dnieper River in the Pontic steppe, a location much further afield from the contact zone of the Caucasus.<sup>45</sup> The style of these swords is also similar to a later 4th century example from Chertomlyk kurgan, which will be discussed later. The overall iconographic style is Mesopotamian. On the top mount or locket, at the throat of the scabbard, both scabbards depict a pair of anthropomorphic winged genii, resembling those common to Assyrian and Urartian art, while the length of the scabbards are lined



by composite creatures with the bodies of bulls or lions, the heads of lions or humans, and wings in the shape of fish, all wielding bows with human arms. At the same time the tabs, from which the sword would have hung from a belt, are both emblazoned with a recumbent deer of a strikingly Scythian style (finding an incredibly direct parallel in [Figure 3]). While some items of Urartian style were probably gained as loot from frequent raiding south of the Caucasus, the items here described are clearly creations intended for a Scythian market, executed in the impressive style of a sedentary kingdom, while displaying Scythian iconographic priorities and input.



**Figure 21.** *Silver mirror* (SHM inv. no. Ky.1904-1/27); silver; Kelermes, Kuban region, Russia; c. 7th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 22.** *Akinakes in Sheath with a stamped ornament*. 7th century BC. Gold, iron. 47 × 14.1 cm (sheath); 15.5 × 7 cm (handle). SHM Inv.no. Ky.1903-2/2. [Image courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum/photo by Andrey Terebenin, Vladimir Terebenin.].



**Figure 23.** *Sword with decorated scabbard* (SHM inv. no. ДН.1763-1/19); cast and forged iron, chased gold; Melgunov (Litoi), Dnieper area, Ukraine; c. 7th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

#### 4.2. Hellenistic Naturalism

The contents of Scythian kurgans from the Pontic steppe, in particular those from the 4th century BC, reflect the strong influence of contact with the Hellenistic world. Here, the Scythians came into contact with the numerous Greek colonies established along the northern shore of the Black Sea. Foremost among these was the Hellenistic Bosphoran kingdom, which controlled the large number of settlements concentrated around the Crimean Kerch Peninsula and the mouth of the Kuban River, highly fertile land which served Greek cities like Athens with grain and also had access to trade routes up the Don and Kuban Rivers.<sup>46</sup> The majority of these Scythian works come from burials around the borders of the Bosphoran kingdom, although there are also numerous finds clustered around the Dnieper River, below the Dnieper Rapids, reflecting strong trade links and cultural exchange up and down the Dnieper with Greek centres like Olbia, a major settlement near the Dnieper-Bug estuary. Under the influence of classical Greek naturalism, these works represent Scythian themes and motifs in more naturalistic scenes. Humans appear much more frequently. While some objects depict classical scenes, most depict Scythians engaged in real and mundane activities. Many objects depict realistic scenes of warriors and hunters. Much more attention has been paid to these objects by scholars than to most Scythian animal art as a result, as they offer us images of Scythian life and material culture that are absent from the Scythians' own animal style art.

The gold vessel [Figure 24] from the late 4th century kurgan of Kul' Oba, near the Greek city of Kerch, is a typical example of many such works found in a variety of kurgans, depicting men in realistic Scythian dress engaged in mundane activities.<sup>47</sup> One figure strings a bow, a pair of spear armed warriors talk, one man binds another's leg, and another examines his fellow's teeth. Other objects show realistic scenes of battle rendered in Greek fashion, allowing us to see what Scythians wore in battle beyond the fine gold arms found in the kurgans. The Solokha comb [Figure 25], from the Solokha kurgan in the Dnieper River basin, is the most well-known of such depictions, representing the heat of close combat between Scythian warriors, one mounted and another on foot facing a third standing over a horse on its back.<sup>48</sup> All three wear long patterned trousers and have long hair and unkempt beards. The lone figure has a sword scabbard of the same style as those discussed above [Figure 23], wears a Hellenistic style linen cuirass, and carries a wicker shield similar to those found in Pazyryk kurgan 1.<sup>49</sup> The other figures both carry a gorytos, a distinctively Scythian case for carrying both a bow and arrows which was hung at the hip, while the mounted warrior carries a scaled shield and wears a Hellenistic cuirass constructed of scale mail, closely resembling the pieces found in Nymphaeum grave 6, and a classically Greek Corinthian type helmet, of which there are numerous examples from Scythian burials.<sup>50</sup> Thus the comb's battle scene itself depicts Scythians influenced by contact and exchange with Greeks, whose war gear and

clothing is a mixture of the distinctly Greek and Scythian. The Solokha kurgan contains other very fine items of Greek craftsmanship, including a lion hunt bowl [Figure 26] that similarly combines the Scythian interest in scenes of contest with Greek artistic priorities, showing Scythians engaged in a classically inspired hunting scene.<sup>51</sup> In this contest humans, with their horses and dogs, are cast in the predatory role, taking on a lion, a much more classical or Near Eastern animal unfamiliar to most steppe nomads.



**Figure 24.** Vessel depicting Scythians (SHM inv. no. KO 11); gold; Kul' Oba, near Kerch, Crimea; late 4th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 25.** Comb with battle scene (SHM inv. no. ДН.1913-1/1); gold; Solokha Tumulus, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; late 5th to early 4th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



**Figure 26.** Vessel with lion hunting scenes (SHM inv. no. ДН.1913-1/40); silver and gilt silver; Kurgan 2, Solokha, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; early 4th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

Most of these items seem to have been made by Greek craftsmen, or at least by metalworkers intimately acquainted with and highly skilled in Greek artistic and manufacturing techniques. Stylistically and in the technical quality of their manufacture they are quite unlike most other Scythian art and resemble the finest Greek work, and if not explicitly concerned with classical subjects, they all show the influence of classical styles. They also come from sites close to Greek settlements or with clear connections to such settlements and the craftsmen could well be drawing on observation of the Scythians in and around these settlements, creating representations of Scythian life comparable to that of Herodotus. Other items from these burials are clearly made by Scythian craftsmen influenced by Greek styles. A plaque from Geremesov [Figure 27], in the Dnieper basin, shows a similar scene to the Solokha comb in a much cruder style, depicting in flat side-on profile a battle between a mounted and dismounted Scythian warrior.<sup>52</sup> The depiction of a human scene suggests Greek influence, while the details of the subject itself confirm that the people among whom it was made experienced and were influenced by Greek contact. The warriors, as well as wearing scale mail and carrying gorytos, both wear Greek Corinthian or Chalcidian helmets like the rider from the Solokha comb [Figure 25].



**Figure 27.** Gold plaque depicting a battle (SHM inv. no. ДН.1859-1/2); gold; Geremesov Khutor, Dnieper area, Ukraine; 4th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].



Although Greek in crafting, these works were still shaped by the priorities of their Scythian audience, reflecting the nomadic way of life and understanding of the world (Cunliffe 2019, p. 283). It has been suggested that many of these objects were distributed to Scythian leaders as gifts by the Bosporan king, perhaps to smooth the way for trade and encourage trading over raiding, and were thus produced with this audience specifically in mind (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 232). The nature and style of the objects, such as the gorytos found at Solokha and Chertomlyk, or the sword from Chertomlyk (resembling those from Kelermes [Figure 22] and Melgunov [Figure 23]), is specifically for Scythian use. They depict scenes relating to Scythian life, scenes with cultural meaning to Scythians, rendered figuratively with Hellenistic naturalism. There is also still a preoccupation (although not total) with scenes of conflict, as well as with figures of and scenes involving animals. Many of these items depict typical Scythian animal style iconography, animals and scenes of contest and predation, either in the stylised style of Scythian art or depicting the typical Scythian subjects and scenes (such as felines or griffins attacking deer) with Hellenistic naturalism. A fine example of this is the gold Solokha phiale [Figure 28], a shallow bowl for pouring libations, every inch of which is crowded by the repeating motif of felines attacking deer.<sup>53</sup> The decoration gives the phiale the impression of being entirely constructed of surging and writhing animal bodies. On closer inspection it is composed of three concentric bands each of which is formed of a separate scene repeated seven times around the circle. The scene repeated on the outer band shows two maned lions, almost exact reflections of each other, burying their mouths in the chest of a deer on its back, its legs in the air, its head obscured. The scene repeated on the middle band sees a recumbent doe, very much in the Scythian style (comparable to [Figures 3–5]), its legs beneath its body, its head upraised, assailed from the front by a lioness and from the back by a maned lion. Both lions are biting the doe's neck, holding on with their front paws and bringing up their back paws to claw, their bodies contorted into circular shapes very much like the feline predator on the Pazyryk 1 saddle cover [Figure 11], the figures of the male lion and the doe very closely resemble the saddle cover motif, while one is strongly minded by the circular forms of the lions, of the classic Scythian feline motif [Figure 7]. The repeating inner band scene partially replicates the middle scene, leaving out the lioness and making the deer an antlered stag (identifiable from its palmate antlers as a fallow deer, a creature, like the lion, not associated with the steppe), but copying the exact positions of the male lion and deer's bodies down to the deer's raised front right leg. While representing these images with a fine Hellenistic naturalism, the strong Scythian motifs make the iconographic input of its intended audience clear.





**Figure 28.** Phiale depicting contest between beasts (SHM inv. no. ДН.1913-1/48); chased gold; Solokha Tumulus, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; late 5th to early 4th century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

#### 4.3. Hellenistic-Scythian Art

On a number of objects of Hellenistic production these stylised Scythian animal scenes appear alongside figurative scenes of human and domestic life. These are the particular objects of our interest as they offer a unique lens on the potential perspectivist meaning of Scythian art. In these objects the juxtaposition of scenes of Scythian animal style and Hellenistic naturalism, with these scenes often featuring similar compositions with parallel weightings and movement, suggests an event seen from two different perspectives, represented in two distinctive styles. These scenes parallel, mirror and perhaps even translate each other. As discussed, the animal contest scene perhaps either serves to illustrate specific incidents of relation or represents relating more abstractly. In these objects, it could stand in as a direct translation or serve as an abstract symbol of the underlying archetypal themes at play in the scene. The meaning of both the scenes of Greek naturalism and of traditional stylised Scythian themes were probably intelligible to Scythians in this border zone, and such syncretic objects perhaps serve to indicate the syncretic nature of beliefs and the influence the Greek worldview maintained alongside a shamanist-perspectivist worldview in the border zone. This is reminiscent of Hellenistic syncretism elsewhere, such as in the Hellenistic influence on Bactrian and Buddhist art and beliefs. Mixing cultures produced mixed objects in which the scenes of both styles and

traditions made sense. There are far less of these items than those that depict either purely animal style themes or naturalistic images of Scythian or Greek life, but they are some of the finest works of Greek production from Scythian kurgans.

Some of the finest items of this kind are from Chertomlyk kurgan, a site near the banks of the Dnieper, below the Dnieper Rapids, and one of the largest burial mounds on the Pontic steppe.<sup>54</sup> These items possibly represent diplomatic gifts from Paerisades I of the Bosporan kingdom (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 26).<sup>55</sup> The gold Chertomlyk scabbard [Figure 29] is of a similar design to the Kelermes [Figure 22] and Melgunov [Figure 23] scabbards, with a similar side tab for attaching at the hip, reflecting the Scythian character of the object.<sup>56</sup> Its scenes are likewise laid out in a similar way. The main body of the scabbard shows a scene of classical inter-human conflict between Hellenic warriors and stereotypical ‘barbarian’ non-Greeks, perhaps Persians or Scythians. The Greek warriors seem to be dominant, their stances are firm and confident, as they are attacking and leaning in from the right, while their opponents lean backwards, their stances insecure, their movements wild and desperate as they become gradually more constrained, defensive, and defeated as the scabbard narrows. The tab again as on the earlier scabbards hosts a Scythian animal style motif, this time in the form of a griffin bearing down on a dappled fallow deer (comparable to [Figure 17]). This animal scene is rendered with Hellenistic naturalism and both creatures are of a Greek form: the griffin has a reptilian dragon’s crest, a feature mainly seen on griffins in Greek influenced work, while the deer is a fallow deer, but it is very definitely a Scythian animal style theme. In this stylistic mixing it is similar to the Solokha phiale [Figure 28]. However, this animal scene also parallels the classical human one below. The predatory griffin has won its contest and bears down on its prey from the right, resembling the victorious Greeks below as they push down on their opponents along the narrowing blade. The sense conveyed is very much of two scenes with a shared meaning, the one a classical scene telling a human story, the other a Scythian animal scene conveying the abstract perspectivist understanding of the scene.



**Figure 29.** Decorated overlay for a scabbard (not including sword and handle) (SHM inv. no. ДН.1863-1/447); gold; Chertomlyk kurgan, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; 350–325 BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

The Solokha gorytos, made of gilded silver and dating from the 4th century BC, in its main panel shows a similar classically inspired scene of battle between stereotypical ‘barbarian’ warriors, clearly intended to be Scythians, a more classical and less realistic version of the Solokha comb battle scene [Figure 25].<sup>57</sup> Two of the warriors are mounted while three are on foot. The panel above this, on that side of the gorytos which the strung bow inside would have faced, there is a scene of a lion and a griffin attacking a fallow deer stag, all three of these of the Greek types discussed above, while in the panel on the right side tab, on the bow string side, two winged and horned felines attack each other. Again,

there is a parallel weighting between the human scene and the animal contests. One of the riders is dragged from his horse and assailed, like the deer, by a warrior from either side. The other rider clashes with a foot soldier in an as yet undecided contest, both still standing firm, poised to strike, reflecting the two composite apex predators still engaged in their contest.

Another gorytos [Figure 30] in a similar style, also from the 4th century, comes from the Chertomlyk kurgan (Aruz et al. 2000, pp. 228–33). In this case, the correlation of the scenes, which follow the same layout as the Solokha gorytos, is not immediately evident. The main panel at first appears to be a fairly tranquil classical mythological scene, composed of sedate and reclining figures. However, it is often identified as portraying the life of Achilles, so its meaning is perhaps less peaceful than it at first appears.<sup>58</sup> A young beardless nude warrior, equipped with a sword (very similar to the sword [Figure 29] found alongside this object) and large aspis or Argive shield, probably Achilles, appears at least three times, while in the last scene (if read left-right and top-bottom) a woman carries an urn, this could be Thetis carrying the golden urn she had given to her son Achilles in which his remains were collected after his death. The other scenes have all variously been interpreted as moments either before or after, or taking place slightly off screen from, key episodes from Achilles' life, serving rhetorically as the shadows or silhouettes of these events.<sup>59</sup> For example, the strange scene in the bottom left in which four female figures, three seated, stare intently off at something beyond the panel's borders. By the very awkwardness of its composition, it draws the viewer's attention to the off-panel subject reflected in the women's reactions. The central seated figure sits uncomfortably, leaning for strength on the shoulders of her companions. They are probably the women of Troy watching the final combat between Achilles and Hector, an invisible scene their reactions are nevertheless intended to bring to the mind of the audience. Similar artefacts from Scythian burials around the Bosporan kingdom, including the Solokha gorytos and Chertomlyk sword [Figure 29], also depict scenes which have been connected to the Trojan war (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 232). Scenes of the Trojan war gained a renewed popularity as an artistic theme throughout Hellenistic art following the campaigns of Alexander the Great, and it seems likely that the meaning of Trojan scenes, even of oblique representations as in the Chertomlyk gorytos, would have been understood in the Scythian-Bosporan border regions (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 233). The main panel thus has perspectivist resonance, depicting a life defined by contest, finally ended in inevitable defeat and death, no matter how seemingly invincible the predator, an analogy for the death of so great a tribal ruler as this object clearly signifies. In the panel above, predatory felines, male and female lions and leopards, are shown taking on a number of different species of challenging prey, such as a bull and a boar. In the wing tab, a male and female griffin attack a leopard. To a perspectivist this is not a straightforward scene of predation, as all three are seen in the form of predators, the status of predator is still at stake, but there is still a hierarchy of predators, indicating the inevitable outcome, the leopard may still be a predator, but its own predation is at hand. The animal and human scenes are less clearly directly parallel than those previously examined (there are fourteen animals and eighteen people), the mythic human panel is also less direct in its narration, but the animal scenes may still serve to accentuate the perspectivist meaning and Scythian understanding of the classical narrative. The scenes of animal combat could easily be interpreted as the hero's combats and challenges, the classical human scenes telling a parallel story, through the preparation before and aftermath these episodes, the shadows cast by these contests. Likewise, the combat in the wing tells the same tragic story as the woman with the urn: the eventual downfall of the predatory feline to higher, spirit-like predators: Paris, fate, Apollo, or death.





**Figure 30.** Gorytos cover (SHM inv. no. Дн.1863-1/435); gold; Chertomlyk kurgan, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; 350–325 BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

Comparable to the Chertomlyk [Figure 30] and Solokha gorytos is the gorytos from Vergina tomb II, often identified as belonging to Philip II of Macedon, in the Central Macedonia region in present-day Greece.<sup>60</sup> The layout of this gorytos' panels is similar. In the central panel a furious battle rages between various classical nude Greek warriors, perhaps another Trojan scene. The upper border is filled with a line of geese or swans, while the wing tab contains a mythic-warrior, perhaps Apollo or a hero. While these gorytos are all of fine Greek manufacture, the gorytos as a piece of war gear is Scythian in origin, and in Vergina this gorytos likely represents an exotic gift to a Macedonian ruler from a Scythian or Bosphoran ruler. Thus, intended for a non-Scythian audience, it has been stripped of any animal style imagery. The geese or swans are a simple repeating pattern, while the tab is given over to an anthropomorphic figure. However, it does perhaps serve to confirm a rule in the layout of these gorytos, all of which are of the same design, that the spaces around the main scene are laid aside for the depiction of scenes other than human narratives.

#### 4.4. The Chertomlyk Amphora

The Chertomlyk silver amphora [Figure 31] offers us one of the finest examples of parallel scenes of Greek naturalism and stylised Scythian animal style.<sup>61</sup> The amphora is two feet four inches, or seventy centimeters, high and was found in the chamber of the kurgan containing a royal female burial (Farkas 1977, p. 125). Working up from the base, the lower section of the vessel below its shoulder is decorated with doves and abstract floral patterns, repeated on its reverse. There are three spouts near the base, two shaped like maned lions' heads, while the central one is in the form of a horse's head with a reptilian dragon frill around its neck and two feathered wings either side. These spouts, and the main mouth at the top, are fitted with strainers, indicating that it was designed, and perhaps used, for a liquid that leaves dregs, probably wine or maybe kumis, fermented mare's milk (Farkas 1977, p. 125).





**Figure 31.** Amphora (SHM inv. no. ДН.1863-1/166); cast, embossed, chased, engraved, and gilded silver; Chertomlyk kurgan, Dnepropetrovsk region, Ukraine; 350–325 BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

In the bottom panel above the shoulder, a scene of Scythian life, and not warfare, is depicted with Hellenistic naturalism. It shows Scythian men engaged in the capture, breaking and training of horses, activities that, considering the central place of the horse in Scythian nomadic pastoralist life as well as warfare, must have been a regular part of their lives. The central scene shows three Scythian men, one with a gorytos, lassoing an unbridled horse, which is straining against the tethers. There may well have been separately attached wires at one point to resemble the rope (Farkas 1977, p. 126). Left of this two Scythians, one again with a gorytos, are engaged in training a horse, bridled but not saddled, with one of the men holding the reins and the knee of the horse's raised leg. This horse pulls its head tightly away but is not moving as dramatically as the central horse. To the right of centre two men look on while another binds or perhaps releases

a rope tying the horse's two front legs together. This time the rope is represented by a small, attached wire. This horse stands still, passive, its tail raised, and neck outstretched, it is bridled and saddled. On the other side of the amphora this panel is much emptier, featuring only two horses, un-bridled or saddled, standing, heads bowed while they graze. These depictions of Scythians, unlike the more stereotypical barbarian warrior portrayals of the Chertomlyk sword [Figure 29] and Solokha gorytos, treat their subjects with a good deal of care, capturing, with a presumable great deal of accuracy, the clothing and activity of the men. The movements and behaviour of the horses, reacting to the various stages of their domestication, are likewise rendered with care and attention. These depictions strongly suggest their basis in observation of the subjects they depict.

The upper panel immediately below the neck of the amphora contains a typical Scythian motif of wild contest (Farkas 1977, pp. 126–27). Two griffins attack a recumbent stag.<sup>62</sup> This is a typical Scythian animal style motif, with plenty of examples across Scythian art, from the sword also in the Chertomlyk burial [Figure 29] to the finial from Pazyryk kurgan 2 [Figure 17]. Another example from Pazyryk 2 comes in the form of the upper tip of a crest from a piece of wooden headgear [Figure 13].<sup>63</sup> A saddle cloth from Pazyryk kurgan 1 [Figure 12] (accompanying the horse burials alongside [Figure 11]) shows a griffin attacking an Argali or Urial sheep from the rear, like the right hand griffin in the amphora. On the amphora, the animals are depicted with characteristically Greek features, the griffins are dragon-crested, while the stag is a fallow deer, nevertheless this scene is rendered in a quite different, non-naturalistic style to the human scene below. This animal style scene is low lying repousse work while in the human scene below the silver figures have been cast separately and attached (Farkas 1977, p. 126). The two scenes are also not in proportion with each other, the stag is double the size of the horses and together with the griffins takes up almost the entire panel, its neck bent over to keep its curved antlers in view. The stag fits very closely to the Scythian motifs of recumbent deer (as seen in [Figures 3–6 and 22]) while the positioning of both the griffins and the deer in the overall scene of predator-prey contest reflects other Scythian predation motifs (such as in [Figures 11, 12 and 28]). The final impression is of scenes represented in two very distinct styles, the above aiming at a particular stylised motif, while the below prioritises naturalistic observation.

Most striking are the parallel compositions of the central scenes (Farkas 1977, p. 126). The stag is positioned directly above the horse, pulling away from its predators as the horse strains against its tethers, and there is a clear similarity in the positioning of their bodies. Both their bodies are facing the same way, the curves of their haunches are parallel, while the dramatic curves of their necks, bending away from their assailants, reflect. The deer's legs are brought under its body as the horse's are, their front left legs are bent beneath them, the bottom of their hooves facing skywards, while their front right legs are raised and stretched out in front of them for support as they struggle. The griffins too appear directly above the men hauling on their ropes. The curves of the men's bodies from head to foot parallel the curves of the griffins' fronts, from their head to their front feet, with the right-hand man even bending slightly lower, while directly below the griffins' back feet, two supporting men are included breaking up the scenes of horse taming. Indeed, one can see that the Greek scene has been specifically shaped to convey its similarity to the classic Scythian motif. This parallel composition of the scenes suggests a corresponding meaning, a concept that has been taken up in other scholars' interpretations of the piece. Both Kuz'mina in her comprehensive interpretation of the amphora and Farkas in her critique of this interpretation nevertheless share the suggestion that the upper animal style scene represents in some way a "supernatural", "astrological", or "cosmological" reflection of the scene below.<sup>64</sup> However, the composition of the work also supports a perspectivist reading: that the meaning of Scythian animal style art is related to ordinary earthly human experiences (the rearing of horses being one of the most staple parts of Scythian nomadic steppe life).

A perspectivist reading sees a stag, the archetypal image of prey, being predated on by two griffins, archetypal forms of a higher sort of predator, an abstract representation

of relation, which in this case is linked to a specific real life human–animal contest. It is telling the same story seen from a different perspective, represented in the animal style. The contest in question concerns the renegotiation of perspectives, the transition of wild horses to domesticity. As previously remarked, despite the animal focus of Scythian art, the animals most prevalent in the Scythians' daily lives, their domestic herd animals, horses, goats, sheep, cattle, are conspicuously absent. Horses in particular played a massive role in Scythian life but are almost completely absent. The answer, which the amphora and other works (addressed below) hint at, must be that they are considered part of the human–domestic sphere and not the archetypal world of wild predator–prey contest. The horse in the central scene is as yet still unharnessed and still struggling, and here the contest between humans and the wildness of the horse still rages. Either side the horses are docile and bridled, assumed into the domestic sphere, no contest taking place. Rather than placed in the chronological sequence of the horses' taming and training, the scene of contest is privileged, bringing it to the centre to line up with the wild contest above, and focusing the work on the aspect of the relation and transition that, as the Scythians' own art shows, preoccupied them most. In the language of Scythian art, the forms of predator and prey are dependent on the perspective of their combatant. To the horse, especially once captured, men could be seen as higher predators, while the horse is to the men what the deer is to the wild predator.<sup>65</sup> Thus the scene of predation is portraying the contest of man and wild horse, in which perspective is renegotiated, the horse being brought forcefully from the wild into the domestic. If the amphora is made to contain kumis, as the strainers perhaps indicate, then the scene assumes a particular relevance to the object's function, depicting man's dominance over horses and ability to feed off them (Farkas 1977, p. 137).

#### 4.5. *The Tolstaya Mogila Pectoral—The Domestic Perspective*

The gold pectoral from the Tolstaya Mogila kurgan, located slightly further down the Dnieper River from Chertomlyk, which dates from the second half of the 4th century BC, is another object of this nature.<sup>66</sup> It is the shape of a crescent moon, a product of incredibly fine Greek craftsmanship, all the figures and intricate detail separately cast and attached. The top band closest to the neck is the narrowest, and features scenes of livestock animals. The particular animal species are mirrored in each half of the crescent, although they are in quite different poses, all facing outwards from the centre. Working from the outside in, there is a bird (perhaps a dove), a kid goat, an adult goat, a ewe sheep with a kneeling male Scythian behind it milking it over a jug, a cow with a calf, which on the left side is feeding from its mother, and a mare with a foal, which on the right side is likewise feeding. In the very centre two shirtless Scythian men face each other, their gorytos hung on the coil borders of the scene, while they stretch the fleece of a sheep out tightly between them. This then is the main central focus of the upper panel, resting, when worn, over the centre of the collar bone and chest. The second band is filled with solid fine swirling patterns and floral decoration and serves to space out the two scenes. The final largest outer lower band features scenes of wild contest of the animal style. Again, each side mirrors the other in subject and works inwards with the widening crescent from the smallest animal to the largest. From the outer point to the centre, two crickets or locusts face each other, a dog chases a rabbit, then on the right side a maned lion and a leopard attack a boar, while on the left they tackle a fallow deer. Finally, taking up the vast majority of this panel, are three scenes of the same subject, a pair of Greek-draconine griffins attack a horse. In the two outer scenes of griffins attacking horses the parallels with other Scythian animal contest motifs are clear, the poses of the predators and prey match up almost exactly with others we have looked at [Figures 11, 12 and 28–31]. This remains largely the case for the central scene, except that the horse's back right leg has been dragged out from under it, giving the horse's body the sense of being stretched out between the griffins. In its positioning and form this animal scene again closely parallels the image of the humans above, stretching out the animal fleece between them. While we have previously discussed horses as being part of scenes of naturalism rather than of animal style, equids do occasionally appear in the

animal style. For instance, a gold belt plaque [Figure 32] from Peter the Great's collection serves as a direct comparison of a composite fantastic creature attacking a horse (and biting it on the neck) within a typical animal style scene. These perhaps depict wild equids like Tarpan, Przewalski's horse, Kiang, and Onager. On the pectoral too, like other Hellenistic renditions of the Scythian animal style [Figures 26 and 28–31], the animals are all of a more Greek or Near Eastern rather than Scythian variety, so there is little incongruous about the presence of horses. In this object we see more animals than horses represented in the same space of human naturalism, but like horses they are animals that pervaded Scythian life and yet are curiously absent from their own art, while they are also part of the domestic sphere. In his essay on perspectivism among the pastoralists of the modern Altai, Ludek Broz has proposed that, in contrast to Amerindian perspectivism which distinguishes fundamentally between the human person and the animal other, in Altaic perspectivism the division of the domestic and wild is key (Broz 2007). It could very well have been the same for the pastoralist Scythians of the Altai and Pontic steppes.



**Figure 32.** Belt plaque (left) with scene of animal combat (SHM inv. no. Сп.1727-1/6); cast and chased gold; Siberian Collection of Peter I; c. 4th to 3rd century BC. [Image is used from [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org) (accessed 9 November 2022), courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia].

There are clear parallels between the domestic and wild scenes in this item, as they simultaneously move from small livestock and scenes of contest between small animals, to scenes involving much larger animals. The central scenes also correspond in a similar way to the Chertomlyk amphora [Figure 31], the one a scene of humans taking from livestock animals, the other of griffins predating a prey animal. Farkas has suggested that the similar structure of this composition to that of the amphora might bely a comparable meaning, the scenes of contest again paralleling the Scythians' relationship with their flock animals (Farkas 1977, p. 137). Cunliffe has likewise proposed that these scenes allude to "the equivalence of humans and predators in their relationships to the productive power of the earth" (Cunliffe 2019, p. 287). Approaching this object as a product of perspectivism, it can be read in a similar manner, with the scenes of wild contest illustrating the Scythians' predator dominance over their livestock. The portrayal perhaps follows similar representational logic to the Chertomlyk gorytos [Figure 30] with the 'human' scene showing only the shadows of contest, the forms of domestic animals implying the contest of their initial domestication and the maintenance of their domestication, depicting the aftermath of their domestication. The central scene, meanwhile, vividly illustrates the aftermath of man's final predation on their animals, having taken the last they can from them. Similar to the Chertomlyk gorytos again, the animal contests do not match up



directly to contests but illustrate the variety of humans' relationships with their different flock animals.

#### 4.6. *The Solokha Comb—Horses as People*

To further understand the Scythian perspectivist approach to domestic animals, I will turn finally to the Solokha comb [Figure 25] already briefly touched on above.<sup>67</sup> The main scene, as outlined earlier, illustrates a battle between Scythian warriors. Below these, supporting the scene and serving as a border between the main scene and the teeth of the comb is a line of five maned lions. These have been largely overlooked in any interpretations of the work and seem at first to be a simple decorative repeating pattern. However, the pattern is irregular, the two lions at either end face inwards towards each other, while the lion in the centre faces in the same direction as one of its neighbours and away from the other. The directions the lions are facing parallels the weighting in the battle scene. Two warriors and a horse, on one side, face the same direction as three of the lions below while the other warrior and the fallen horse face the same way as the other two lions. The same number of combatants in parallel positions in the animal and human scenes can likewise be seen, as noted above, in the Solokha gorytos as well as in the central elements of the Chertomlyk amphora [Figure 31]. Thus, it seems that this lion border may actually be serving as a representation of the battle in the animal style, with humans and horses, both in the domestic sphere, treated as equal combatants. Although not entangled, the lions are crouching poised, as though in anticipation of contact, their bodies tensed, their haunches up, their heads low, mouths open bearing teeth. Both sides of this stylised lion contest are represented as equal predators in an as yet unresolved negotiation of predatorial status.

Most notably, while on the amphora and pectoral the horses in the human scenes played the role of prey animals, in this battle scene they are represented in the animal style as equal predator combatants to the Scythian warriors. In the amphora scene the central horse is still part of the natural wild, still struggling against its domestication, still in a contest fighting against its predators. On the pectoral they stand alongside sheep, goats, and cattle as herd animals, subject to the dominant humans. In the case of the comb though the horses are fighting alongside the humans, as part of the same battle, one of the horses having indeed sustained injury as a combatant. While treated as part of the human domestic sphere, in many areas of life horses could perhaps be treated as possessing equal personhood with humans. A similar argument has been proposed by Gala Argent in reference to the Pazyryk horse tack (such as the saddle cloths [Figures 11 and 12]), suggesting that in certain aspects of life horses were treated by the Scythians as part of the human world (Argent 2010). For instance horses have a large presence in burials, not in the animal art but killed alongside the deceased's human servants and retainers to be buried with their master.<sup>68</sup> Perspectives can be shaped by different contexts, leading to different forms of representation in the animal style. The loss of contest by the wild horses in the amphora moves them into the domestic sphere of the pectoral, but in inter-human contest, where the horse serves as a battle partner to the human warrior, its status as a person, equally invested in the contest, is highlighted, its life, like a retainer's, at the service of the master, as in the burial.<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

In this study I have proposed cosmological perspectivism as a useful concept with which to approach the interpretation of stylised Scythian animal style art. Within the cosmology of perspectivism, as first described by Viveiros de Castro in his study of Amerindian cosmology, human personhood is seen as subjective, experienced the same way by all creatures, while a person's view of other creatures is likewise subjective, shaped by one's own perspective. Predators and prey are universal images in the cosmology of perspectivism, images with which all creatures represent their own predators and prey from their perspective, while the contest between predators and prey is the key form of relation through which the perspective that defines one's position in the predator-prey food chain is negotiated.

Such a theory is both appropriate and potentially constructive for approaching the interpretation of Scythian animal art for a number of reasons. While initially defined within the Amerindian context, subsequent studies have identified perspectivism as relevant to anthropological and art historical study further afield, most especially to the present-day pastoralists of the Inner Asian steppe that was home to the Scythians. The Scythians share much in common with other perspectivists, their lives were closely intertwined with the wild animal world around them and they potentially practiced a similar form of shamanism. Furthermore, Scythian animal art resembles the cosmology of perspectivism in its preoccupation with predators and prey, but most especially with scenes of wild contest. Predators, prey, and contest scenes, the key forms and narratives of perspectivism, are the key subjects and narratives of Scythian art. Read as perspectivist images, we understand that these Scythian depictions of animals represent more than just the specific creatures but can serve as archetypal representations of predators and prey. Composite creatures also can serve as ways of representing the fluid animal forms of higher, often spirit, apex predators, whether those are predators of humans, like disease, weather, and death, or of others, for instance humans to some of their prey. Depictions of wild contest again represent more than just the specific scene visualised but can be used to represent abstract contest through which all sorts of interspecies and interpersonal relating can be understood.

Several examples of Greek-Scythian art juxtapose scenes of stylised Scythian animal style art and naturalistic Hellenistic scenes of humans and domestic animals. These corresponding scenes suggest the parallel meanings of the scenes, supporting the perspectivist interpretation that Scythian art can be representing, in abstract form, universal scenes of contest, or in this case specific scenes of human interactions, with one another and with domestic animals. They are potentially offering us the same scene but from two different perspectives, the human and the archetypal, represented in the artistic style of two different cultures, meeting in the border land. These artefacts thus offer us insight into what kind of scenes Scythian animal style art more broadly might be representing. We might, for instance, imagine how an Altaic Scythian scene of a Caspian tiger attacking a stag [Figure 11], when projected through the lens of Hellenistic naturalism, could reveal two Scythian warriors fighting [Figure 25] or Scythians taming and training horses [Figure 31]. We should not however assume that the Scythians' 'language' of animal art need be as specific as this. As the vigorous and vibrant forms of Scythian animal art, arranged and compiled together on the skin and clothes, lead the eye on a dizzying swirling journey that drives home the universal significance of predator and prey and the universal relevance of their contest.

Doubtless nothing is so simple, and perhaps none of the meaning the Scythians placed in or derived from their art was so consciously understood. However, it is my hope that this study will have helped to bring a little more into focus the world in which they saw themselves existing and that it might introduce to the field a concept that helps us get closer to answering that key question of how "the steppe peoples thought about animals" (Farkas 2000, p. 16). From that key question unfolds their whole way of being, of understanding, of thinking, and of creating.

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## Abbreviations

BM	The British Museum, London
MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
SHM	The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
EKRM	East Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History, Ust-Kamenogorsk
UAM	Ufa Archaeology and Ethnography Museum, Ufa
AM	Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The exhibition brought together artefacts from the Filippovka burial mounds in the southern Urals, excavated between 1986 and 1990 and afterwards becoming part of the collection of the Ufa Archaeological Museum, and some of the finest Scythian artefacts from the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. For the full catalogue, see (Aruz et al. 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> For a short overview of the concept of cosmological perspectivism, see (Marina and Cesarino 2014, August 26).
- <sup>3</sup> For the fullest outline and exploration of his theory, see (Viveiros de Castro 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> For a brilliant recent and comprehensive survey of the Scythians, their history, archaeology, art and culture, see (Cunliffe 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> For an introduction to these sources, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 44–48). Herodotus brought to his account his own first-hand observations from time he had spent in Olbia, a Greek city on the north coast of the Black Sea, near the Dnieper-Bug estuary, an important contact point between the Greeks and Scythians. For more, see (West 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> On the gorodišče finds, see (Cunliffe 2019, p. 22).
- <sup>7</sup> A good English language catalogue of Scythian artworks comes from the British Museum's recent (2017) exhibition of Scythian artefacts from the State Hermitage Museum's collection, which contains many of the finest examples of Scythian art and material finds (Simpson and Pankova 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> For an overview and the history of Peter the Great's collection, see (Korolkova 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> On the casting process, see (Korolkova 2017, pp. 68–69). On the gold working techniques analysed from finds from a recent well documented site, see (Amir and Martín-Torres 2021). On Achaemenid stylistic influence in the artefacts of Peter's collection, see (Korolkova 2017, pp. 38–39).
- <sup>10</sup> On similarities between items in Peter the Great's Siberian collection and those in the Oxus Treasure, in the British Museum's collection, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 308–19, in particular cf. figs. 31 and 171).
- <sup>11</sup> On Scythian tattoos, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 95–97, 108–9).
- <sup>12</sup> According to Herodotus (*Hist* 4. 131–132), the Achaemenid Persians themselves faced difficulty in interpreting the Scythian language of animal symbols. When, in the early 6th century, under Darius I, they attempted an invasion of the Pontic steppe but found themselves unable to catch the mobile Scythians or their flocks, they were sent a message by the Scythians in the form of a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows. The meaning was unclear to Darius and the others with him but was at last correctly interpreted by one of his advisors. Within the meaning of this message the Persians were represented by these prey animals and were being advised to embody them and flee before the predation of the Scythians' arrows, a symbolic message wholly intune with a perspectivist cosmology. To Herodotus' understanding at least, the Scythians spoke in a language of animals and predation not obviously comprehensible to a sedentary Iranic audience.
- <sup>13</sup> A short overview of Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism is offered in (Marina and Cesarino 2014, August 26). Viveiros de Castro explicitly unpacked his theory in (Viveiros de Castro 2012), but he had already utilised and outlined it in earlier work, such as (Viveiros de Castro 1998).
- <sup>14</sup> If he is correct, might Euripides be drawing on the Scythians for his model of (to a Greek perspective) chaotic non-Greeks with strange, disconcerting beliefs?
- <sup>15</sup> For studies of Mongolia (Pedersen 2001, 2007; Empson 2007) and of the Siberian Yukaghirs (Willerslev 2004, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> *Inner Asia* vol. 9, pp. 141–345, published in 2007, see (Viveiros de Castro 2007).
- <sup>17</sup> For studies on the Turkic peoples of the Altai and the Dukha, Tuvan Turkic reindeer herders of northern Mongolia, see (Broz 2007; Kristensen 2007), for a study on the Tibetans of Yunnan, see (Da Col 2007).
- <sup>18</sup> For a work that seeks to approach Amerindian and Central Asian shamanism comparatively, see (Seaman and Day 1994, esp. pp. 4–5).
- <sup>19</sup> Cunliffe suggests that Scythian animal art is the 'manifestation of a deeply rooted shamanistic belief system' (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 92–93). In support of this interpretation, a number of petroglyphs from Georgievskaya and Boyaru in the Minusinsk valley (near Altai), from where some of the earliest Scythian animal style (known as the Tagar culture) originates, seem to depict shamanic figures with antlered headgear and drums (Cunliffe 2019, p. 93), while several finds in the Altai kurgans, such as the antlered and animal shaped headdresses in Pazyryk kurgans 1 and 2, resemble similar shamanic equipment (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 273–74). Such 'animal clothing' is important in helping perspectivist shamans 'inhabit' other creatures' perspectives (Viveiros

de Castro 2012, p. 136). It has also been suggested that some of Herodotus' descriptions may describe shamanic practices, such as the Scythians' divination (Hdt. 4.67, 172), for an outline of these, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 272–73). Nevertheless, 'shamanism' is a fraught term, and this aspect of Scythian ritual practice is not well established and would benefit from further investigation.

On this repeating motif, see (Cunliffe 2019, p. 284).

On this motif, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 284–85) On these Shilitki finds, see (Arúz et al. 2000, pp. 172–73; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 147; Samashev et al. 2021, p. 33).

For the historical range of the Eurasian moose, see (Heptner et al. 1988, pp. 314–24).

For the historical range of the Persian leopard, see (Heptner and Sludskii 1992, pp. 212–16).

For the historical range of the Caspian tiger, see (Heptner and Sludskii 1992, pp. 108–21).

Golden eagles do sometimes hunt and catch small deer and mountain goats and are still used for hunting by peoples in the Kazakh steppe and Altai mountains. For more on the depiction of fantastical eagle predation in Figure 10, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 308).

On the historical scale of the Mongolian white-tailed gazelle's migration, see (Squires 2012, pp. 359–61).

For more on this vessel (UAM inv. no. 831/7, 9, 10a,b), see (Arúz et al. 2000, pp. 95–98).

The tattoos on the right arm of the female burial in Pazyryk kurgan 5 depict tigers and snow leopards predating deer and moose. See (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 97).

For more on this particular artefact, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 243). For more on the horse burials and costumes of Pazyryk kurgan 1, see (Argent 2010). For an overview of Pazyryk kurgan 1, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 18–19).

On the original colouring of the saddle cover, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 243).

The notorious Dzut, which describes a number of extreme weather conditions that can affect flocks on the Central Asian steppe, can regularly kill millions of flock animals.

That the Scythians are representing higher levels of contest taking place on a supranatural level is an already popular idea, although discussed only in a vague and undefined sense. For instance, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 267).

For more on this object, see (Arúz et al. 2000, p. 261).

For more on this 5th century depiction of a griffin holding a stag's head in its beak from Pazyryk 2, see (Arúz et al. 2000, pp. 270–71), for more on the golden stags of Filippovka, see (Farkas 2000, p. 14; Arúz et al. 2000, pp. 26–27, 72–79).

Spirits often appear in forms connected with the heavens, as lightning flashes or birds (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 108).

Examples of these creatures in Scythian art from the peripheries include: the Solokha gorytos (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 344–45), the golden torcs from the Oxus treasure (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 308) and the Peter the Great collection (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 39), and the chalcedony seal from a Scythian grave in the Greek Black Sea settlement of Nymphaeum, see (Vickers 2002, p. 42; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 290). For an overview of the Oxus treasure, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 310–12). For an overview of the Nymphaeum site, see (Vickers 2002, pp. 1–55; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 286).

On this object, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 59).

Künzl has made a somewhat similar argument in relation to the Tolstaya Mogila pectoral, on which scenes of griffin predation appear alongside grasshoppers. Künzl suggests that the predation of the beasts represents the depravation wrought by the predation of a locust swarm (Künzl 2016).

As Cunliffe has said regarding the Scythians, "There can be no doubt that the constant battle for life ramified into every corner of nomad existence" (Cunliffe 2019, p. 289).

"It is not clear . . . that the horse sacrifices practiced by the Scythians had any connection with eternity, rebirth and the immortality of the king" (Farkas 1977, pp. 124–25).

For an outline of this interpretation, see (Price 2010).

For a similar reading, that animal style used to represent events from human lives, in this case in Pazyryk tattoos, see (Azbelev 2017).

On these objects, see (Artamonov 1970, p. 50; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 276–78). Bianili was the name the Urartians used for themselves. For an overview of Urartian history, language and culture, including incidents of contact with the Scythians, see (Baumer 2021, pp. 76–94). For a brief narrative history of Scythian interactions with the Urartians and Assyrians, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 31–35, 111–17).

On this object (SHM inv. no. Ky.1903-2/3), see (Artamonov 1970; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 198).

The resemblance between the two is so close as to suggest a shared origin, perhaps a place of manufacture or derivative source. The hatchet was also likely produced by the same workshop. For more on the Kelermes sword and scabbard, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 223; Cunliffe 2019, p. 115), for more on the Melgunov example, see (Artamonov 1970, p. 50; Cunliffe 2019, p. 116).

For more on Hellenistic Bosphoran kingdom, see (Hind 1994) On the Bosphoran grain trade, see (Hind 1994, p. 489).

On this object, see (Arúz et al. 2000, pp. 206–10; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 292; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 332–33).



- On this object, see (Aruz et al. 2000, pp. 218–23; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 340–41).
- For the shields (SHM inv. no. 1295-232) (SHM inv. no. 1295-382) found in Pazyryk 1, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 230–31; Cunliffe 2019, p. 247).
- For the pieces of scale armour (AM inv. no. AN 1885.465) found in Nymphaeum 6, see (Vickers 2002, pp. 46–47; Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 290–91). On Greek helmet finds in Scythian burials, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 249–50) On Scythian armour in general, see (Cernenko 1983, pp. 7–11; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 247–51).
- On this object, see (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 223; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 294; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 338–39).
- On this object, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 150).
- Herodotus records several examples of the Scythians pouring libations as part of different rituals (Hdt. 4.62, 70). The inclusion of such a distinctly Greek object in a Scythian burial suggests the possibility of Greek influence on Scythian rituals, and potentially on Scythian beliefs in the contact zone.
- On Chertomlyk kurgan, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 26, 264–65).
- On the production of the Chertomlyk artefacts, see (Treister 1999).
- On this object, see (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 233).
- On this object, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 344–45).
- This interpretation was first suggested by the German archaeologist Carl Robert in 1889 and has been largely accepted by scholars (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 232).
- For an interpretation of each scene as an episode in Achilles' life, see (Aruz et al. 2000, p. 232).
- For comparative studies of the Vergina gorytos with Scythian examples, see: (Plika 2015; Galdanova 2016)
- For other studies of the amphora, see: (Kuz'mina 1976, 1982; Farkas 1977; Simpson and Pankova 2017, p. 265; Cunliffe 2019, pp. 350–51).
- There are no good images available of the rear of the amphora and, as far as I am aware, no other English language scholars have made a description. A blurred black and white image is included in Kuz'mina's work, from which it is unclear whether this top panel contains a direct repeat of the front scene or is left empty, see (Kuz'mina 1982).
- On this object, including a complete reconstruction, see (Simpson and Pankova 2017, pp. 112–13).
- Kuz'mina interprets the upper scene as decidedly rooted in Iranian astrology, an assumption that overlooks the deeply and uniquely Scythian nature of the motif (Kuz'mina 1976, 1982). In her counter argument, Farkas questions any straightforward Iranian equivalency but does still hold, from the object alone, that it could represent a cosmological conflict that reflects or interprets the earthly conflict below (Farkas 1977, p. 137).
- Viveiros de Castro specifies that 'some animals predated on by humans even see humans as spirits' (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 127).
- Currently housed in the Kiev Museum of Historical Treasures. On this object, see (Cunliffe 2019, pp. 286–87, 348–49). For an alternative interpretation, see (Künzl 2016). Interestingly, Künzl makes an interpretation similar to perspectivism of the griffins as representatives of a higher 'predatory' natural disaster in the form of the locusts depicted in the borders.
- See notes 48 above.
- In Chertomlyk, four men, one woman and twelve horses were killed and buried alongside their lord (Farkas 1977, p. 125). To what extent indeed could the relation of a lord to his subjects have been expressed in the visual language of predation?
- For more on the relationship between Scythians and their horses, see (Recht 2021).

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