THE TOTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEER IN IRON AGE
SCYTHIAN AND SARMATIAN CULTURES
IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Within the animal style of Scythian and Sarmatian cultures, a trinity of animals represented the three different localities of the World Tree—birds for the celestial sphere, herd animals for the earth, and predators or mythical creatures for the underworld. Though the deer was within the earth herd group, I propose that the deer was also vested with the supernatural power to fly through the celestial sphere as well as guide the dead to the underworld. Why did Scythians and Sarmatians imbue the deer with the ability to travel across the three realms of the World Tree? This scholarship serves to explore the question of deer flight across the World Tree on the basis of evidence found within gravesites, artifacts, ancient comparative cultures, descendant indigenous cultures, animal behavior, and extant oral traditions.

Rationale

Within the framework of Iron Age Scythians and Sarmatians, this interdisciplinary study seeks to explore how ancient nomads built meaning through their economic needs and lifestyle; how they expressed that meaning through context and iconography; and how this symbolism further informed their religious and cultural practice.

Advisor: Dr. Tristan Cabello
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**Introduction**

Scythian art is known for a distinctive style that features three sets of animals both real and mythological, engaged in complex interactions. The first group involves reindeer, deer, horses, goats, and ibex; the second consists of panthers, griffins, and dragons; while the third group features various bird species, not including birds of prey. Depictions of this animal interaction feature the deer under the attack of a griffin, or the deer with large spiraling tree antlers with small birds growing from the tips. These images have a circularity that suggest the life cycle. Together, the three groups symbolize the three realms of the World Tree. The birds are the upper realm (celestial sphere), the herd animals are the middle realm (earth), and the predators are the lower realm (underworld). Some scholars refer to the World Tree as the “Tree of Life,” which highlights the aspect of regeneration; or the “Cosmic Tree,” since the tree is the map of the cosmos.

Liudmila Galanina states that, “Three of the most popular motifs of the so-called Scythian animal style were the bird of prey, the stag, and the panther; it is possible that they represented the different spheres of creation: the heavens, the earth, and the netherworld, respectively.”

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While this view is noted among most scholars, the spiritual ability of the deer to travel across all three spheres has not been fully explored.

At the Filipovka archaeological site of early Sarmatians, golden deer are depicted with swirling wing shapes on the shoulders and hips. The antlers are about the same size as the body, and they curve and spiral like the branches of a tree, which may be representative of the World Tree. Though the deer is of the earth, it stands apart from the other animals with its symbolic ability to both fly and guide the dead to the underworld. As a source of power in life and death, the deer was central to the belief system of the Scythians and Sarmatians.

**Exploration of the Sources**

It is a challenge to gain an understanding of the culture of the Scythians and Sarmatians in the Iron Age, due to their lack of written language. Scholars, such as W.W. Malandra, and Esther Jacobson, rely on the traditions of distant Scythian and Sarmatian descendants, such as indigenous Siberian groups. Anatoli I. Martynov explores the connection of the deer with the Tree of Life symbol from the Iron Age to the Medieval era, providing direct cultural connections to late modern indigenous groups. One limitation in the comparison between late modern traditions and ancient beliefs is how meanings have changed. Many scholars have contributed to this effort, providing foundational resources. By comparing historical traditions to ancient resources, a hypothesis can be constructed on ancient belief systems.
Ancient Greek, Roman, Persian, Chinese, and Indian literary resources are also helpful. The ancestors of the Scythians and Sarmatians were the first to domesticate and train the horse for riding, which enabled them to migrate to Persia, India, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Western Europe. Trade and commerce also contributed to the sharing of cultural practices and beliefs. Therefore, some clues can be gained through a comparison of cultural beliefs in these regions. The symbolism of the deer throughout these cultures is surprisingly consistent with little variation.

Finally, since the Scythians and Sarmatians were in large part nomadic, their iconography traveled with them—tattooed on their skin, embroidered or sewn onto their clothing, belted around their waists, decorated as part of their weaponry, sculpted as various forms of headdress, and designed onto the backs of their handheld mirrors. The image of the deer was present on one’s person. Their art was a living embodiment, designed for movement and dimensionality. Ellen Reeder notes, “… a salient principle of the works of Scythian art... is, simply, movement, whether that manifests itself as continuity, evolution, rotation, curvature, transformation, or even sound.” These artifacts provided the foundation for a worldview of constant motion among the Scythians and Sarmatians. As Cristoph Baumer puts it, these are cultures where “… the human being stands in nature, not over nature.”

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Scythian and Sarmatian Cultures

Located in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Scythians and Sarmatians were semi-nomadic pastoralists who subsisted through the hunt and the herd. They depended on the horse and wagon as their modes of transport. Barry Cunliffe offers evidence that the first horses were domesticated in this region, first in the Volga region, and then in Northern Kazakhstan between 4800-3700 BCE. The Scythians and Sarmatians carried their art with them on their bodies, on their horses, and in their wagons. Their most valued belongings were buried with them under large mounds of earth known as kurgans. They mainly spoke Iranian languages, and culture was maintained through the oral tradition with no written texts. Due to this, much of what we know about these groups is based on their artifacts as well as the written records from ancient Greece, Rome, Persia, and China.

The Greeks and Romans referred to Scythians and Sarmatians as “barbarians.” They found their egalitarianism to be both strange and seductive. Since both men and women served as warriors among the Scythians and Sarmatians, fierce female archers inspired the legends of the Amazon women, who were a popular subject of Greek vase paintings, second to Heracles. Rather than being an ethnic designation, the word Amazon may simply have referred to a warrior woman. Adrienne Mayor states, “Archaeology reveals that about one out of three or four nomad women of the steppes was an active warrior buried with her weapons.” Christoph Baumer notes that in order to survive the harsh nomadic lifestyle, it was necessary for men and women to share equal

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6 Mayor, 11.
labor. Around 1000 BCE, the nomads invented pants to prevent chaffing when horseback riding, and both men and women wore this garment. The Greeks considered pants to be effeminate attire.

The Scythians lived from the late 8th century BCE through the 4th century BCE. Ellen Reeder states that until the first millennium BCE, their ancestors were located in the Altai Mountains, where they hunted the specific animals that are found in the animal style. Due to pressure from the Massagetae and Issedones, the Scythians migrated west of the Ural Mountains in the 8th century BCE where they drove out the local Cimmerians. The Scythians switched from a hunting subsistence to mainly herding sheep, cattle, and horses.

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Domesticated reindeer first appeared around the 9th century BCE, east of the Ural Mountains in Siberia, and spread from that region. In the Nordic, reindeer domestication was a separate occurrence. Unlike other domesticated species, 50% of the reindeer species continues to remain wild. It is not clear if the ancestors of Scythians were reindeer herders, but regardless, the reindeer was essential to their hunting subsistence.

By the eighth century BCE, the Scythians populated the largest grassland in the world, the steppe, with an expanse of about 5,000 miles and extending as far west as the Danube. Under pressure, they had left the forested slopes of the Altai where the golden eagle, snow leopard, spotted leopard, ibex, reindeer, and red deer still live today. The Altai Mountains are located

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where Kazakhstan, West Siberia, Mongolia, and China meet, and it is important to note that this is where the animal style originates. Ellen Reeder states:

In their travels over the steppes north of the Aral Sea and Caspian Sea, and in the humus-rich steppes of the Ukraine, [the Scythians] would have become familiar with a different host of animals that they chose to depict rarely, if at all: fox, wolf, jackal, rabbit, badger, tortoise, hedgehog, and small antelope… Instead, the eagle, leopard, and deer remain dominant motifs and even serve as prototypes when additions are made to the Scythian vocabulary.15

The neighboring Saka people were of distant relation to the Scythians and Sarmatians, and they lived on the steppe of modern-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan above the Iranian border.16 Christoph Baumer notes, “The ethnonym ‘Saka’ and the corresponding Chinese name ‘Sai,’ … derive either from skuoa [northern Iranian term for ‘archer’] or from the Iranian root sag, which means ‘deer’ in Ossetian, which could indicate that the deer was the totem of the Saka.”17 Also of etymological significance, Gernot Windfuhr makes a case for a connection between the words Scythian and Sarmatian with “shooter,” “archer,” “arrow,” or “provided with arrows.”18 The term Skythai for Scythian was invented by the Greeks, while the Iranians referred to the nomads along their borders as the Saka.19

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The early Sauromatians, who appear to be an offshoot of the Scythians, lived east of Scythian territory up to the fifth century BCE. It is possible that Sauromatian and Sarmatian refer to the same people since the Greeks preferred to use the former term while the Romans preferred the latter. The later Sarmatian cultures include the Siraces, Aorsi, Roxolani, Iazyges, and the Alans, among others. In a shift from genetically European Scythians, these later Sarmatian groups mixed with Asiatic people that migrated from further east. Alexei Alekseev notes that, “Analysis of skeletal remains suggests that areas now inhabited by eastern Asiatic peoples, such as western Mongolia, Tuva, the Minusinsk Basin, and the Altai Mountains, were mainly populated in Scythian times by Europeans… Certain prominent elements of Scythian material culture, however—their horse bridles, their weapons (above all, their bows and arrows), and their art, in the so-called animal style—evidence a non-European origin.”

Among the Sarmatians, artifacts containing the animal style were recovered only from the burials of wealthy priestesses and celebrated warriors. The animal style must have been representative of elite status, and its use faded and then came back into popularity. This shift appears to measure a similar course to the number of women in power. In eras and regions where rich female graves were prominent, the animal style was also prominent. Around the 1st century CE, Sarmatian artifacts began to differ in style from the Scythians with the development of

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20 Eszter Istvánovits, Valéria Kulesár, Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2017), 52.
24 Istvánovits, Kulesár, Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People, 44.
25 Istvánovits, Kulesár, 84.
polychromy. Precious stones and colored glass were inset into the features of the animal depictions.

Eventually, the Goths and Sarmatians defeated the Scythians entirely, and the Sarmatians continued to live in Central Asia and Eastern Europe through the 1st century CE, before being dispersed and partially driven to Spain and North Africa by the Altaic Huns in the fourth century CE. From that point, Turkic languages replaced Iranian as the dominant idiom spoken in Eurasia. Various Sarmatian splinter groups survived into the Middle Ages, and today the Ossetians in the Caucasus are the only direct surviving descendants of the Scythians and Sarmatian Alans. Ossetians continue to speak their ancient Iranian language, albeit in a form that has been altered over time.

**Origins of Deer Imagery**

The origins of significant deer imagery can be found in the Bronze Age deer stones of Siberia and Mongolia, circa 1300-700 BCE at the dawn of the Scythian age. Barry Cunliffe states:

> What is important... is that the lively animal art of the Tagar culture, which quickly spreads across the steppe and is so prevalent in the art of the Pontic steppe

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26 Istvánovits, Kulesár, *Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People*, 86.
Scythians, originates in the Bronze Age culture of the Altai-Sayan Mountains and is most likely to be a manifestation of a deeply rooted shamanistic belief system. A petroglyph, clearly of a shaman, has been found carved on a rock at Georgievskaya in a Tagar period context.  

Within the markings of the deer stone in figure 6, the deer appear to be flying upwards. The antlers are exaggerated, extending toward the back hips in a wave-like pattern. Snouts protrude in an elongated form. Just beneath the deer, an arrow points into a solar symbol. Below that, weapons seem to represent the underworld. Leonid Sergeevich Marsadolov notes that other unbroken stones include either solar or lunar symbols at the uppermost part of the stone. This falls within the tripartite theme of the celestial sphere at the top, the earth in the middle, and the underworld at the bottom of the stone. According to Cristoph Baumer, 90 percent of the 700 deer stones are found in Mongolia, while the rest are found in Altai, Tuva, and Xinjiang. Much of this region is the ancestral homeland of the Scythians and Sarmatians.

Some scholars point to origins for the animal style in the Ancient Near East, though this particular theory remains unfounded. This is complicated by the fact that the animal style precedes the Scythians, and their ancestors migrated to regions throughout the Near East including Persia, India, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. It seems clear that Neolithic cultures of Siberia and Mongolia developed their own beliefs around the nomadic way of life and the prevalence of the deer. Some of these beliefs evolved and shifted among groups who migrated to

31 Cunliffe, _The Scythians – Nomad Warriors of the Steppe_, 92-93.  
the South and the West, where the style and selection of animals changed according to the region. However, the deer remained central within the symbolic language of the Scythians and Sarmatians.

Art historian Ann Farkas notes, “The deer motif in Scythian art is generally associated with the reindeer, which is native to northern Siberia and the forest-steppes as far west as eastern Europe.”34 It is significant that during the Bronze Age, reindeer roamed across a much larger territory. They lived further west in the southern steppe up until the 1st millennium BCE, before the climate began warming and the reindeer had to move north.35 This was just two hundred years before the Scythians arrived in the southern steppe, on their journey from the Altai Mountains where reindeer were prevalent.

Though the reindeer was no longer present in the lives of many Scythian and Sarmatian groups, the animal remained central to their artistic tradition. The deer was not simply viewed as a provider of sustenance but maintained supernatural elements through material expression. It was represented through constructions of gold, which was symbolic of divinity. Antlers took the shape of branching trees and birds, while the body was often positioned in the sacrificial kneeling pose of a savior figure.

Examination of the Reindeer

In order to understand the significance of the reindeer to a group of people, it is important to understand the characteristics of the animal itself. Reindeer are built for extreme weather. Some of their survival tactics must have informed ancient nomads on how to survive the cold climate. Reindeer fur is extremely thick and hollow, which provides them with the ability to float while crossing wide bodies of water during migration. Unlike other breeds of deer that have a wet unprotected nose and lips that freeze in cold temperatures, the reindeer’s nose and lips are safeguarded by fur. This allows them to survive longer and travel further in cold climates. The reindeer’s nostrils also have a complex mode of warming the air before it reaches the lungs, as well as retaining heat before an exhale so that heat does not exit the body. Due to this method of heat retention, there is no steam released from the reindeer’s breath in cold weather. To the ancient nomads, this lack of steam may have appeared to be a divine feature.

The wide hooves of the reindeer act as snowshoes, and fur extends down the middle of the hoof which helps with traction. The hoof also acts as a shovel to dig for food in snow up to three feet deep. Their high gait helps them walk through bogs and deep snow, both of which are prevalent in Siberia. As they walk, their back-leg tendons click, which may act as an aid in staying with the herd in white-out snowstorms. If under attack, the herd forms an impressive cyclone to confuse predators.

Reindeer eat less and are less active in the winter. During the summer months, they take advantage of vegetation and store up fat reserves for the winter. In the cold months, they prefer
to receive their hydration from eating snow and refuse to drink from other water sources. The lack of minerals in snow-water may allow for less water intake since an over-abundance of minerals must be eliminated through urination. For the same reason, reindeer prefer to eat lichen since it acts as a carbohydrate with fewer proteins, fats, minerals, and vitamins to eliminate. Other grazing animals do not prefer to eat lichen, which adds an advantage for the reindeer.\textsuperscript{36}

At the Cougar Mountain Zoo in Issaquah, Washington, I observed a herd of Siberian reindeer. The first visit was in April, when fur is molting, and antlers are in the early growth process. One reindeer named Rawley, had impressive antler growth after losing his previous antlers just four months prior.

The second visit was in late November, when reindeer fur is at its thickest; velvet has shed from antlers; and antlers are at full growth. Rawley’s antlers grew to an impressive size and were the largest of the herd. That day another reindeer, Rogue, went on a walk through the pathways with his handler. The females also had impressive antler growth, and though large, their antlers are slightly thinner than that of the males. One reindeer calf displayed antler growth in the first year of life. He was born before the spring visit and is now about half the size of Rogue.

\textsuperscript{36} Reindeer Research Program, University of Alaska Fairbanks, https://reindeer.salrm.uaf.edu/about_reindeer/adaptations/.
Growing up to an inch a day, antlers are the fastest growing tissue among mammals. Aided by velvet in the early growth phase, antlers receive a rich supply of energy from the high concentration of blood vessels and nerve endings that support them.\(^{37}\) In Northern Eurasia, the breeding season for reindeer is in early Autumn. After breeding season, male reindeer lose their antlers from around November to December. The females lose their antlers about 1-2 months later, while pregnant females do not shed their antlers until just after giving birth to their calves. Due to the maintenance of their antlers, females gain dominance during the winter months. Pregnant females use their antlers to ward off males in order to gain a greater portion of the food in the harsh winter.

After the male and the female provide for new life, the loss of their antlers directly follows, at which point the calves and the antlers both begin their life cycle. From the very first year of life

for the calf on into adulthood, antlers grow back larger the following year. The antlers are representative of regeneration.

The Role of the Deer in Building Meaning and Ritual Practice

Before there is belief, there is meaning. The deer was central to the lives of the ancient nomads in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where herds were plentiful. Much of the region is not suitable for farming, so the existence of deer and other animals meant survival. As a resource, deer brought food and warmth to the hearth, their skins provided clothing, and their sinew provided the means to construct the recurve bow which was used for the hunt. Life was arranged around the movement and the life cycle of the herd.

The annual cycle of reindeer herd-movement formed a system of belief in a way that differed from agricultural societies. W.W. Malandra notes, “…economics, the brute necessities of keeping together life and limb, the material considerations of existence are never viewed simply as such, but are infused with value and meaning.” Ritual and religious practice gave symbolic language to the return of the herd after summer as well as other events within the reindeer life cycle. These annual markers informed the lives of nomadic herds-people.

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38 Reindeer Research Program
The Divine Deer in Ancient Myth

Myths offer further evidence that the deer was imbued with supernatural characteristics, aiding in flight through the celestial sphere or acting as a guide to the underworld. In ancient Greece, it is possible that the myth of the golden-antlered Cerynitian hind (female deer) came from the northeast since the only female deer species that grows antlers is the reindeer, and reindeer were not present in the region. The antlered hind was symbolic of a divine feminine nature.

ApolloDorus recorded the narrative of the Cerynitian hind, who is exceptionally large and runs faster than an arrow. The hind appears to be immortal and is sacred to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. Semi-divine Heracles must conquer twelve labors on his journey to achieving immortality. In the third labor, Heracles is ordered to shoot the Cerynitian hind with an arrow. The hind is so fast, that he pursues her for a year, going as far afield as the land known as Hyperborea—a place beyond the north winds.40 The Greek god Boreas was the personification of the north or northeast wind.

Pliny the Elder states, “From the extreme north-north-east to the northernmost point at which the sun rises in summer there are the Scythians, and outside of them and beyond the point where the north-north-east begins some have placed the Hyperboreans.”41 Snow is a common feature of Hyperborea. Pliny the Elder places the Hyperboreans either on the northern coast of Europe or

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Asia. When Heracles finally shoots the Cerynitian hind, she does not die, and he brings her back to Mycenae.

Other aspects in the labors of Heracles offer further clues that this myth has origins in the northeast. His weapon of choice is a bow and arrow—a weapon most commonly associated with Scythian and Sarmatian warriors. Due to the warfare style in Classical Greece, such as the hoplite phalanx and heavy armor, archery was most likely relegated to the lower classes and would not have included a semi-divine hero. Furthermore, after Heracles kills a nine-headed hydra (a water snake monster), he dips his arrowheads into its venom. It was a common practice among the Scythians to dip their arrowheads in viper poison to poison their victims. Heracles is also sent to claim the leather or golden belt of the greatest female warrior among the Amazons, Hippolyta. The belt was given to her by the god of war, Ares, which was a celebrated god among the Scythians. Heracles claims the belt, after he kills Hippolyta.

In addition to the Scythian cultural signifiers within the story of Heracles, the primordial ancestor of the Scythians was Tartitäus or Targitaus, who was the son of Papaeus (Zeus) by the daughter of the Borysthenes (Dnieper) river. In the Greek version Tartitāus is referred to as Heracles. He mates with a viper-woman, and she gives birth to three sons. He instructs her that

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42 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, 52.
45 Apollodorus, *The Library*, 73-84.
when the boys reach adulthood, they must compete for leadership of Scythia. The youngest son, Scythes, wins the competition most notably by drawing the bow left by Heracles.\textsuperscript{47} Throughout the narrative of Heracles, the divine aspect of the Cerynitian hind; the antlers on a female deer; and the addition of Scythian cultural signifiers is suggestive of northeast origins.

Belief in the supernatural deer also traveled north. Folklorist, J.G. McKay, explores the ancient deer cults of ancient Caledonians in Northern Britain (generally Scotland), and notes that in England and Germany in the Middles Ages, stag dances were performed by men dressed as women, which is reminiscent of the female dress of the Enarei priesthood among the Scythians.\textsuperscript{48} In the folklore of the Scottish highlands, unusually large and divine fairy women most commonly transformed themselves into the red deer, and the deer were viewed as supernatural.\textsuperscript{49}

An Irish deer goddess, known as the ‘Old Woman of Beare,’ acted as a guide for those who were traveling from the Land of the Dead into Ireland.\textsuperscript{50} In this instance, the divine feminine deer acted as psychopomp between this world and the underworld. Much of the basis for the deer cult descends from the eras when people subsisted from the hunt rather than the domestic herd. The Highlanders transitioned from hunting deer to herding cattle.\textsuperscript{51} Human migration and cross-cultural contact maintained the narratives of a divine feminine deer throughout many regions.

\textsuperscript{48} J.G. McKay, “The Deer-Cult and the Deer-Goddess Cult of the Ancient Caledonians,” \textit{Folklore}, Volume 43, Number 2 (June 30, 1932), 144-145.
\textsuperscript{49} McKay, 147-148.
\textsuperscript{50} McKay, 151.
\textsuperscript{51} McKay, 171.
Tales of the Narts

The Ossetians live in the Caucasus region and are direct descendants of the Scythians and Sarmatian Alans. They have maintained their oral epic tradition for centuries. These narratives are traditionally expressed in song and accompanied by the *fandir*, a twelve-string hand-harp. The *Tales of the Narts* was first translated into Russian and set down to text in 1868 by Anton A. Schiefner.52

The heroes of the stories consist of four generations of one family, known as the Narts. They descend from the daughter of the water-god Zerashsha.53 This primordial ancestor is reminiscent of that of the Scythians—the daughter of the river Borysthenes. Also in connection to the Scythians, the Narts primordial father appears to be a sun god, similar to Papaeus. G.F. Chursin records the words of an Ossetian storyteller: “Once upon a time the sun had children, the Nart warriors.”54 John Colarusso points out that the word *nar(a)* really means ‘sun,’ not in Ossetian, but in Mongolian… Alan-Mongolian relations were very close indeed.”55 Another reminder of the Scythians and Sarmatians, is the love for iron and gold, which features throughout the epic.56 Colarusso observes, “The world of the gods, the world of the people, and world of nature, these three worlds in Nart times breathe still as one life, and understand each other’s tongue.”57

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52 *Tales of the Narts* – *Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), XV.
53 *Tales of the Narts*, XXX-XXXI.
54 *Tales of the Narts*, LI.
55 *Tales of the Narts*, I.
56 *Tales of the Narts*, LIX.
57 *Tales of the Narts*, LXIII.
The most powerful woman among the Narts is the immortal sorceress Shatana, and she is associated with the primordial horse and dog. The events of the Shatana cycle appear to be intertwined with the Alan princess Satenick, whose history was recorded by the Armenian historian, Moisei Khorenski, in the 2nd century CE. John Colarusso dates the origin of the Nart tales to sometime around the 1st millennium BCE.

*The Tales of the Narts* is perhaps the only direct literary link to the beliefs of the ancient Scythians and Sarmatians, and the magical qualities of the deer are apparent within the narrative. When the two brothers Akhshar and Akhshartag go on a quest, Akhshartag meets an old woman who also happens to be a Nart. She is blind, and so Akhshartag asks her, “Is there no remedy that would give you back the sight of one eye at least?” She replies, “If someone gathered some drops of morning dew and mixed them with doe’s milk, and sprinkled it on my wound, then I would see!” So Akhshartag finds a deer to milk, mixes it with dew, and once he applies it to the old woman, she is able to see again. It is then revealed that the old woman is the sister of Warkhag, the oldest Nart.

The tales also refer to an orchard fence made of reindeer antlers, that is so high, a bird cannot fly over it. In another instance, the hero Shoshlan quarrels with a man over the hunt of a deer, whose “skin was such that every hair on it rang like a bell and every bristle laughed like a tambourine. One had only to touch it, and it began to sing in wonderful voices.”

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58 *Tales of the Narts*, XXXV, LIII.
59 *Tales of the Narts*, XXXIV.
60 *Tales of the Narts*, 5-6.
61 *Tales of the Narts*, 8.
62 *Tales of the Narts*, 85.
The golden doe appears most significantly in the tale, “Shoshlan in the Land of the Dead.” Shoshlan and Urizhmag attempt to shoot the golden doe with their arrows, but as they do, the arrows and quiver all fall into the ground. “Shoshlan was quite unaware that he was pursuing the daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh, though disguised as a deer, who had seven giants to protect her.” When the giants attempt to kill Shoslan, their knives grow dull, and they consult Asirukhsh who exclaims that Shoshlan is predestined for her. The proof is the tattoos of the sun and moon on his back. The giants ask a steep bride price of Shoslan. The most difficult objects to acquire are some leaves from the tree of Azh, which only grows in the Land of the Dead.

Shoshlan travels into the underworld and sees many strange sights. He makes the mistake of picking up a hat off the ground and puts it into his tunic. The hat is the trickster Shirdon in disguise. As Shoshlan attempts to go home on his steed, archers assist Shirdon in shooting arrows up into the hooves of Shoshlan’s horse, and the horse falls. “Before [the steed’s] last breath he said to Shoshlan: ‘As soon as I die, quickly but carefully skin me, and stuff the hide with straw. Afterward sit on my stuffed image, and who knows, perhaps I may carry you as far as your home again!’” But Shirdon hears the exchange between the horse and Shoshlan, and the archers shoot flaming arrows into the horse so that it will burn to ashes. Shoshlan returns home only with his saddle and the leaves from the tree of Azh. However, with the assistance of his mother Shatana, Shoshlan meets the rest of the bride price and is given Asirukhsh in marriage. This scene has particular importance to the death rituals of the Scythians and Sarmatians which will be explored further on.

63 Tales of the Narts, 161.
64 Tales of the Narts, 180.
65 Tales of the Narts, 160-180.
From the *Tales of the Narts*, many useful narrative details can be gathered. The Nart heroes are descended from the sun. Reindeer are numerous and their antler’s act as a protective force against fruit-seeking birds. Doe’s milk contains healing properties. The fur of a certain deer has the ability to sing; and the golden doe is a semi-divine or fully divine female in disguise.

*The Histories of Herodotus*

The ancient historian, Herodotus, was born in Asia Minor around 490 BCE, and traveled throughout the Mediterranean, the Black Sea region, and North Africa. He wrote extensively about the Scythians, and though his views can be biased and at times unverified, much of the information he provides has been substantiated by archaeological finds. More than any other writer, Herodotus provides us with the most complete understanding of Scythian life:

> The Scythians… have managed one thing… better than anyone else on the face of the earth: I mean their own preservation… A people without fortified towns, living, as the Scythians do, in wagons which they take with them wherever they go, accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback with bows and arrows, and dependent for their food not upon agriculture but upon their cattle: how can such a people fail to defeat the attempt of an invader not only to subdue them, but even to make contact with them?\(^{66}\)

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Herodotus also shares information on the religious beliefs of the Scythians:

The only gods the Scythians worship are Hestia (their chief deity), Zeus, and Earth (whom they believe to be the wife of Zeus), and, as deities of secondary importance, Apollo, Celestial Aphrodite, Heracles, and Ares. These are recognized by the entire nation; the Royal Scythians also offer sacrifice to Poseidon. In the Scythian language Hestia is Tabiti, Zeus (very properly, in my opinion) Papaeus, Earth Api, Apollo Oetosyrus, Celestial Aphrodite Argimpasa, Poseidon Thagimasadas.67

Here, the bias of Herodotus is apparent since he relates the deities of the Scythians to those of the Greeks. While these deities may not be completely reflective, the information that Herodotus provides is valuable. He shares that though the Scythians did not create altars, temples, or statues of their deities, they did worship Ares at an altar of piled brushwood with an ancient iron scimitar positioned upright into the top of the pile.68

Barry Cunliffe expands on the importance of Tabiti:

At the head is Tabiti, the flaming one, goddess of heat, fire, and the hearth. The flaming objects falling from the sky come from her realm and they are kept in trust by the king. She, in turn, is guardian of the king and of his hearth… Since Tabiti is really the abstract notion of fire, rather than a personified deity, there are no physical representations of her. The concept of fires as the primeval substance upon which the universe is based is deeply embedded in the Indo-Iranian belief systems and plays a prominent role in Zoroastrian

68 Herodotus, 259.
religion, the roots of which can be traced back into the Early Bronze Age in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{69}

Tabiti may have a connection to the deer. In myth and visual representation, the deer is often connected to the solar symbol, the hearth fire, and to fire itself. Objects made of gold may symbolize the celestial element of Tabiti. As Mistress of Animals, Argimpasa also relates to the deer as a giver of life and a representative of the Tree of Life.

Herodotus shares the narrative of how the Sauromatae or Sauromatians came to be a separate people group from the Scythians. According to his account, a war between the Greeks and a group of Amazon women, resulted in the Amazons being taken into captivity at the river Thermodon in modern-day Turkey. Onboard a Greek ship, the women killed their captors and due to a lack of knowledge on seafaring, they suffered a shipwreck in Scythian territory to the north on Lake Maeotis, which today is known as the Sea of Azov between Russia and Ukraine. The women paired up with some men from the Scythian group, but they refused to live in the same way as Scythian women and wanted to settle their own territory. So, the group traveled for three days northeast of Lake Maeotis and settled there. Among the Sauromatians, there was a law that no woman could marry until she had killed in battle, and therefore some women never married.\textsuperscript{70} The rich female graves among this early group of Sarmatians reflect their egalitarian social structure.

\textsuperscript{69} Cunliffe, The Scythians – Nomad Warriors of the Steppe, 267-268.
\textsuperscript{70} Herodotus, The Histories, 276-278.
The Enarei Priesthood

Herodotus mentions two religious figures among the Scythians, that of the soothsayer and the Enarei priesthood. While the soothsayers prophesied with willow rods, the Enarei used the inner bark of the lime tree, which they twisted through their fingers as they prophesied. The Enarei claimed that Argimpasa, or the Mistress of Animals, taught them this method of divination. Herodotus may not have understood the full range of their activities. In the early common era, the Huns and Mongols worshipped an identical goddess which they referred to as ‘the Shamaness.’

Herodotus identifies the Enarei as “women-men,” referring to their transgender appearance. Barry Cunliffe notes that, “Transgender behavior was a characteristic of shamanism in various parts of the world in the recent past.” The female dress of the Enarei priesthood finds parallel among the late modern indigenous Chukchee, Kamchadal, Asiatic Eskimo, and the early Koryak. Male shamans underwent a ritual to become transgender women, and some married other men while others maintained their families from prior to the transformative ritual. It is unclear when the practice of shamanism first began, but the word itself derives from the Tungus tribes of Siberia, and as previously noted, depictions of shamanistic figures have been recorded from Bronze Age petroglyphs in the Altai Mountains.

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Within the early stages of prehistory, it is possible that only deities were thought to enact the role of the shaman; or that the deer embodied shamanistic travel along the axis of the World Tree. As witnessed within ancient literature, the deer may have been a feminine deity with exceptional speed of movement, suggesting omnipresence. The next step would have been for the hero to embark on this journey. In the Sumerian epic, Gilgamesh descends to the underworld to then make his way back to the earth again. The earliest cuneiform record of this narrative is dated to the 3rd millennium BCE, which makes this epic one of the most ancient pieces of literature.77 Perhaps these heroic activities were then transferred to the role of the practitioner, such as the Enarei who learned their practice from Argimpasa.

Esther Jacobson clarifies that shamanism is generally practiced by a group of people who are set apart, who travel between this world and the other worlds. They act as guides for souls who have lost their way in the struggles between life and death. This differs from the religious practice among household members and group leaders that involves the protection of livestock, family members, and the hearth fire on the earthly plane of existence.78

Among the early Sauromatians, there is evidence of a female priesthood, and this culture in particular is especially known for egalitarian or matrilineal characteristics. T. Sulimirski states:

Hippocrates maintained that Sarmatian women were not only warriors but also priestesses. Pedestalled stone 'altars', or flat, rounded stone dishes with raised rims are

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77 *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York, Penguin Epics, 2006), Introductory Note.
frequently found among the grave goods in a series of female burials in cemeteries of the south Ural group during the Sauromatian period, and they have also been found in similar graves further to the east, in central Kazakhstan. These objects, often decorated in the ‘Scythian’ animal style, are recognized as an attribute of the women-priestesses. 79

As previously noted, among Sarmatian groups the animal style was only recovered from the graves of the female priesthood and celebrated warriors. 80 This suggests that the animal style maintained a religious aspect as well as being a signifier for elite status.

The World Tree

The World Tree was a structure of the cosmos that connected the three realms of existence along a pole known as the axis mundi. 81 The pole provided the means for shamanic travel up into the celestial sphere or down into the underworld. The Indo-Aryans, who migrated from Central Asia to India, reference this cosmos structure within the Vedic Sanskrit text, the Rig Veda (circa 1200 – 900 BCE). Within the complex narrative of creation, truth is born out of heat, and the creator of the gods is thought of as a sculptor or carpenter of wood. The creator must also be sacrificed.

79 Sulimirski, The Sarmatians, 34.
80 Istvánovits, Kulesár, Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People, 44.
81 Jacobson, The Deer Goddess of Ancient Siberia, 177.
for the creation to exist, and out of this sacrifice comes greatness. 82 Verse 10.81.4 offers an interesting reference to the cosmic principle of a tree-like structure.

What was the wood and what was the tree from which they carved the sky and the earth?
You deep thinkers, ask yourselves in your own hearts, what base did he stand on when he set up the worlds? 83

Here the basis of creation is plant life, an oxygenating force that provides the structure for which all else is built upon, both within the ground and the atmosphere, but also below the earth and above the ceiling of the sky in the ancient conception. The ceiling is the barrier between the world of mortal and immortal life, connected by the axis mundi.

Many late modern indigenous groups viewed the underworld as an inversion of this world, in which everything in the underworld is the opposite. If one was right-handed in this world, they would be left-handed in the underworld. If food was scarce in this world, food would be plentiful in the underworld. If a mirror was broken in this world, it would be intact in the underworld. 84 Within Scythian and some Sarmatian burials, this may explain why handheld mirrors were often broken at the time of burial. 85

In an examination of the goddess Argimpasa, Barry Cunliffe notes that, “The general form in which she is presented is reminiscent of the tree of life (ficus mundi), a basic notion shared

83 Rig Veda, 35.
84 Eliade, Shamanism – Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, 205.
85 Sulimirski, The Sarmatians, 89.
throughout the Indo-Iranian religion.” Further on, he adds, “The deer is depicted as a noble beast often in repose with legs tucked beneath its body. Conceptually it may have symbolized the source of life… the deer, or its herbivore substitutes, may have been conceived of as the Tree of Life sustaining a world always in tension.” Within these descriptions, the divine female figure and the deer share the same symbolic embodiment of the Tree of Life. Furthermore, the deer provided the sacrifice that maintained the sustenance for human life. Creation is sustained out of the sacrifice of death.

Significance of Antlers

From the Pre-Scythian societies of the Neolithic, petroglyphs display various tree antler styles including coniferous and deciduous representations. The antlers in the Scythian and Sarmatian deer style also stress an appearance of over-sized branching. These figures highlight the regenerative plant-like aspect of antlers. The later appearance of bird-tipped antlers may represent deer flight. Overall, these tree antler structures are reminiscent of the World Tree or Tree of Life, signifying both the embodiment of the tree as well as the ability to travel along the axis of the cosmos.

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87 Cunliffe, 283.
Deer Sinew Used for Archery

The bow and arrow were the most widely used weapon among Iron Age Scythians. The bow itself took many years to make due to seasoning at each stage of the process. Around a wooden base, the bow was constructed from horn, horsehair, birch bark, deer or ox sinew, and glue made from animals or fish.\(^{90}\) It was the sinew, or shredded fibers of tendon, that provided the compression for arrow-flight, since the fibers shrink when dried onto the back of the recurve bow. Ann Farkas elaborates:

But what does the bow have to do with the deer? Everything. Deer sinew was probably glued to the back of the bow to add flexibility, and the bowstring itself was made from deer sinew. As Gernot Windfuhr has pointed out to this author, Mithra’s chariot, in the Avestan hymn to Mithra (Gershevitch 1959, stanza 128), is described as holding ‘a thousand well-made ‘bow-stretchers’—that is a bow-string made of the sinews of deer—hailing from supernature they fly.’\(^{91}\)

The bow embodied the deer and provided for flight and precision. Since viper poison was used for the tip of the arrow, the arrow also embodied the snake, which has a connection to the snake-woman or Mistress of Animals. Adrienne Mayor states that, “In antiquity, an article of clothing or equipment was believed to magically transfer the owner’s personal qualities to the wearer.”\(^{92}\)

This is reminiscent of the prize belt given to Hippolyte by Ares. Mayor’s statement could also be

understood to mean that the qualities of an animal continued to maintain their relevance within the objects made from their remains. Within various groups of Siberian indigenous people, this view was certainly the case.

As Christoph Baumer notes, “The combination of horse riding and the composite bow, invented before or around the middle of the second millennium BC, gave the steppe peoples unprecedented military might, against which the settled agrarian cultures could offer little resistance.”  The bow was a powerful weapon that contributed to the dominance of steppe riders. Adrienne Mayor explains, “Modern parallels suggest that a Scythian archer could shoot about 15-20 arrows a minute, probably averaging a distance of about 500-600 feet and achieving accuracy at about 200 feet.” The recurve bow was held away from the body, and the steppe rider was known to shoot backwards while riding away from the victim, using the flow of the wind to aid in the shot. This was referred to as the Parthian shot. The handheld mirror may have been used as a rearview device. Among Sarmatian groups, the bow and arrow were less popular. Within the 4th century BCE, the Sarmatian elite commonly used the lance, which was up to 5 meters long.

The Koryak of Far Eastern Russia provide myths of how at one time great heroes could travel up into the celestial sphere by following the path of an arrow shot through the sky. In those times, one did not need to be a shaman to travel along the axis mundi. Since the deer was embodied in

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the flight of the arrow, the deer established the route of travel up through the atmosphere and into the upper realm.

**The Solar Symbol**

Within ancient art, the deer is often paired with the solar symbol, such as the Thracian silver vessel in figure 14. The deer fly over water and exhibit bird-tipped antlers. The solar symbol is positioned between the deer, and large circles obscure the face of the deer. Another example of this pairing can be found on the deer stone in Mongolia in figure 6 that includes the flying deer, the sun, and various weapons below. In the golden artifacts of Scythians and Sarmatians, it should be noted that gold is symbolic of the sun.

Flight and the fire of the golden sun are embodied in the image of the deer.

In the iconography of many regions, the wheel was viewed as symbolic of the sun, and this was also the case in the petroglyphs of Central Asia. Christoph Baumer states that the wheel was invented in Central Asia, somewhere east of the Ural Mountains. Wheels with eight to twelve spokes were found in wagon graves of the Sintashta and Petrokva cultures and are up to 4,100 years old. This predates evidence of the wheel in Anatolia by 200 years, and in Mesopotamia by 300 years. In Central Asia and China, the chariot was not only a vehicle in life, but it was also
thought of as a carriage to the afterlife. The concept of the sun-chariot was also widely known in Northern and Southeastern Europe.  

Within the hymns of the Rig Veda there are references to charioteers, wagon burials, horse sacrifice, and the power of the deer. The first reference to the deer and the sun appears in a hymn entitled, “The Pressing-Stones.” The stones were used as a press in the making of the intoxicating drink, Soma. It is not known what Soma was made from, but it caused the user to hallucinate and inspired the feeling of being immortal. The liquid itself was thought of as a god. This verse appears to refer to a group of hinds birthing fire or a fire deity which is associated with the creation of the intoxicating drink, Soma.

The eagles have sent their cry up to the sky. Ardently the dark hinds danced in the meadow. They plunge deep to the rendezvous with the lower stone; they infuse it with floods of the seed of the sun-bright one.

The second reference to deer-power is found in “Indra and the Maruts.” As a deity of weather and war who wields the thunderbolt, Indra is similar to Jupiter or Zeus, while the Maruts are wind deities. This verse suggests that the deer is more sovereign than the horse:

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98 Rig Veda, 119.  
99 Rig Veda, 124.
[Maruts:] ‘Because of this, we have adorned our bodies and harnessed the self-willed horses next to the chariot; and now we have yoked does for greater power. Indra, you have always acknowledged our independent spirits.\textsuperscript{100}

This conversation takes place between earth and sky. Within the passage, the addition of the hinds adds power and speed to the chariot. While horses normally take the lead position on a chariot, they are harnessed off to the side. Based on this placement, the does are revealed to be more powerful than the horses, and this power is tied to the sense of independence and freedom among the Maruts.

Overall, the deer maintains a supernatural element associated with the sun, the wheel, and flight through the celestial sphere. While the chariot acts as a mode of transport for the dead, it also functions as a vehicle for the gods in the upper realm. The Indo-Aryans suggest that the doe is more powerful than the horse. Since this is somewhat difficult to imagine through a physical comparison between the horse and the deer, it must be assumed that this verse refers to the divine power of the doe, to act as guide to the celestial sphere as well as the underworld.

**Importance of the Hearth**

\textsuperscript{100} Rig Veda, 168.
For many indigenous cultures in North Eurasia, the hearth and the herd were inter-related. Esther Jacobson notes that among the Chukchee and the Koryak, the hearth was viewed as the center of the world and acted as an axis connection where the dead passed through to the lower world. Within the annual cycle, the farther away the reindeer herd, the greater the risk for evil spirits to come up through the fire from the lower world. When the reindeer returned from their summer grazing, a festival of thanksgiving was celebrated.¹⁰¹ W.W. Malandra expands on this ritual:

When in the fall the weather begins to turn cold once more the men return with the herds… At the first approach of the herds the fires in the houses are extinguished and new sacred fires are lighted outside containing a spark from the sacred fire-board… Some said that ‘the herd is met with fire in the same manner as relatives and guests are welcomed; while, according to others, the fire signifies the source whence the reindeer originated.’¹⁰²

These ritual patterns united the hearth fire with the reindeer as an expression of the annual cycle. New fires were also started after the fawns were born and after the females shed their antlers.¹⁰³ The sacred fire-board acted as guardian for the reindeer, while the reindeer guarded the middle realm from the lower realm through proximity to the sacred fire. The reindeer not only traveled along the axis of the World Tree, but also acted as a source of protection against the dangers of the axis mundi.

¹⁰³ Malandra, 47.
A Preference for *Amanita Muscaria*

Among the late modern shamans of Central Asia, there were several methods for entering a trance state to act as psychopomp between the three realms of the World Tree. These included breathing exercises, beating a drum, dancing, and the use of intoxicants.\(^{104}\) Through these means, shamans communed with spirits that could guide them, in order to guide the souls of humans on the correct path between life and death.

The highly toxic *amanita muscaria* (fly agaric) mushroom grows under conifer trees and is unmistakable for its bright red color and white dots. It becomes less poisonous when dried, and the shamans of Central Asia used small portions to hallucinate. The mushrooms were harvested just before winter solstice, and while collecting them, the shamans wore red costumes with white fur trim, which resembled the dress of the later folk figure known as Santa Claus. Fly agaric is known to give the user flushed cheeks and the feeling of being pulled through the air.

Within the yurt (or *ger*), the shaman took flight into the celestial sphere through the crown or wheel of the tent, which is a circular opening at the top that is constructed for the release of smoke from the hearth.\(^{105}\)

The shaman’s use of fly agaric is interesting since the reindeer has a predilection for eating this psychedelic mushroom.\(^{106}\) Reindeer seek out fly agaric with a passion and enjoy the experience of

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\(^{104}\) Hasanov, “A Reflection of the Cimmerian and Scythian Religious Rites in Archaeology,” 528.


\(^{106}\) “Fly Agaric.”
hallucination. It is possible that the reindeer’s love of fly agaric led humans to follow the same practice. Reindeer may have also assisted shamans in finding specimens, in the same way that pigs offer assistance in finding truffle fungi. In this sense, the reindeer goes beyond the shaping of human life structure and economic meaning, into the ability to create religious experience, enabling the shaman’s flight across the axis of the World Tree.

It is unclear if Scythian and Sarmatian groups used fly agaric in their religious practice, however, according to Herodotus and archaeological evidence, Scythians used hemp seeds to hallucinate after burial rituals as a source of purification. After washing their heads with soap and water, they would go into a small portable tent where they could breathe in the intoxicating aroma of hemp seeds thrown on a fire. A copper pot with burned hemp seeds and a small steam tent were found in a Pazyryk burial mound among the Scytho-Siberians. While this is not a shamanic practice, the use of hallucinogens was central to their traditions.

The Shaman’s Drum

According to W.W. Malandra, among the late modern Sel’kup shamans of Siberia, “The most important piece of shamanistic equipment is the drum… In construction they are both replicas of the cosmos and usually are live creatures.” This drum was made from the World Tree and the

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107 Herodotus, The Histories, 264.
skin of the reindeer. In imbuing the drum with power, the reindeer was resurrected through a complex ritual involving visits to the Mistress of the Universe, and the sprinkling of the waters of life onto the drum. Esther Jacobson further defines the enlivening of the drum:

The skin from which the drum was made had to be taken from a specially hunted and consecrated deer. The drum frame had to be made from slats taken from a living and consecrated tree. Should the tree die as a result of the cutting of its wood, then the drum would die, too. Within virtually all Siberian shamanic societies, the drum had to be ‘enlivened’ and consecrated through a special ceremony.\textsuperscript{110}

Drums were excavated from the Pazyryk site, though it has not been determined whether they were simply used as musical instruments or engaged for the use of ritual.\textsuperscript{111} However, the power of the drum is attested in many ancient cultures that predate the Scythians. Zaur Hasanov notes that, “In the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic, drum and drum-beaters symbolize power and the journey to the underworld.”\textsuperscript{112}

**Carriage of the Dead**

In both recent history and ancient history, there is clear evidence that the deer acted as a guide to the underworld. W.W. Malandra recounts that among the late modern indigenous Chukchee

\textsuperscript{110} Jacobson, *The Deer Goddess of Ancient Siberia*, 176.
\textsuperscript{111} Cunliffe, *The Scythians – Nomad Warriors of the Steppe*, 274.
\textsuperscript{112} Hasanov, “A Reflection of the Cimmerian and Scythian Religious Rites in Archaeology,” *Proceedings of the 8th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, 530.
people, four reindeer carried the funeral sled in a procession to the burial site. When the sled arrived, the head of the corpse was pointed:

…toward ‘midnight’. Then the reindeer are unhitched, and with four knives are stabbed simultaneously from the right and from the left side. As soon as they have fallen the harness is put on again; but the collars are now placed over the right shoulders, the reverse of the usual way. The chief of the cortège, sitting in his place astride the corpse, jerks the reins violently, and urges the reindeer with the whip, pretending that he is going fast to the country of the dead.\footnote{Malandra, “A Religio-Historical Study of Reindeer in the Spiritual Life of North Eurasian Peoples,” Numen, 64.}

This ritual is practiced without the assistance of the shaman.\footnote{Malandra, 64.} Here, the reins are reversed before the journey is taken since as previously noted, within the underworld everything is in reverse. This correlates to the Scythians and Sarmatians with the example that if a mirror is broken in this world, it will not be broken in the underworld. Also, in connection to the cortège, between the sixth to fourth century BCE, at the graves of Pazyryk, Tuekta, and Berek in the Russian and Kazakh Altai, horses sacrificed with their master were found buried, wearing the masks of deer, elk, and ibex. Cristoph Baumer states:

Thanks to these grave gifts, the horse acquired the attributes of the deer and its regenerative power, or that of the ibex, which was venerated as an ‘inhabitant of heaven’ and a symbol of fertility. It appears that the horse, symbolically transformed into a deer
or ibex, served as guide and mount for the deceased in entering the afterlife. This idea was present in south-western Eurasia in the Caucasus earlier as well.\textsuperscript{115}

Except for the Sauromatians, the majority of Sarmatians did not practice animal sacrifice.\textsuperscript{116, 117} It is possible that gold artifacts in the animal style acted as a symbolic stand-in for the original horse sacrifices of the Scythians. As a belief begins to fade, the action of sacrifice is no longer necessary, in which case an object of representation acts as a substitute within the ritual.

The Filipovka gravesite offers many stunning examples of golden deer. R.M. Iusupov maintains that the skulls buried there, “… most closely resemble those of Saka from Kazakhstan and the Aral Sea region and those of the Usuns from eastern Kazakhstan.”\textsuperscript{118} As previously noted, the Saka were of close relation to the Scythians. However, the deer artifacts at the Filipovka gravesite differ from the Scythian and Sarmatian expression. Instead of antlers that branch back

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\textsuperscript{115} Baumer, \textit{The History of Central Asia}, 163.
\textsuperscript{116} Istvánovits, Kulcsár, \textit{Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People}, 37.
\textsuperscript{117} Istvánovits, Kulcsár, 257.
across the body, the Filipovka deer have antlers that branch upwards. These figures are made of wood and covered in gold foil. Some of the deer display the teeth of a predator, which may have offered some protective assistance in the guidance of the dead.

At the entrance to the chamber of kurgan 1 at Filipovka, Ann Farkas notes, “Five of the golden deer, with bird’s-head-topped antlers set at a right angle to the bodies… had been placed in the passageway outside the tomb chamber before the mound was heaped over the grave…”¹¹⁹ This placement is striking for the similarity to Scythian sacrificial horse burials, which demonstrates that the golden deer may have been placed there as guides for the dead. Furthermore, the bird-tipped antlers and wing-like patterns on the shoulders and hips suggest the capacity for flight. The earliest appearance of a deer with bird-tipped antlers was found in Bulgaria and is dated from the 10th to 7th century BCE.¹²⁰

Herodotus described a Scythian burial tradition that is reminiscent of the carriage of the dead tradition among late modern Siberian indigenous groups. A year after the initial ceremony of the death of a king, a second ceremony took place. Fifty of the king’s servants, and fifty of his horses were killed, gutted, stuffed with chaff, and then sewn back together again. Wagon wheels were cut in half and set parallel to each other with the rims facing downward. In this fashion, the wheels were stuck into the ground around the gravesite. Stake poles were then driven through the horses from tail to neck, which acted as supports to hold the horses on top of the wagon wheels,

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¹²⁰ Farkas, 11.
with their legs dangling off the ground. Each horse wore a bridle, which was led forwards to another stake in the ground. The servants were then fitted with stakes in a similar fashion so that they could be propped up as though riding each horse. Herodotus states that the riders were left there unburied, in order to guard the dead.\footnote{Herodotus, \textit{The Histories}, 263-264.}

A troupe of riders with horses corroborate Herodotus’s account in the burial site of Chertomlýk, dated to the 4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE and located in the Northern Pontic region of Ukraine.\footnote{Askold I. Ivantchick, “The Funeral of Scythian Kings,” \textit{The Barbarians of Ancient Europe – Realities and Interactions} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 88.} True to Herodotus’ account, the riders were left at ground level.\footnote{Cunliffe, \textit{The Scythsians – Nomad Warriors of the Steppe}, 307.} In research literature, death riders are referred to in German as \textit{totenreiter}.\footnote{Rolle, “The Scythsians,” \textit{The Barbarians of Ancient Europe – Realities and Interactions}, 116.} Embalmed bodies have been excavated at many other sites, including the Pazyryk kurgans in the Altai region of Siberia, dated to the 5\textsuperscript{th} – 3\textsuperscript{rd} centuries BCE. The Yüeh-chih culture buried at Pazyryk shares many similarities with Scythian and Sarmatian cultures.\footnote{Ivantchick, “The Funeral of Scythian Kings,” \textit{The Barbarians of Ancient Europe}, 92.} \footnote{Istvánovits, Kulesár, \textit{Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People}, 146.}

\begin{figure}[h!]
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\caption{Reconstruction of Chertomlýk Death Riders or \textit{Totenreiter}}
\end{figure}
From these details it can be gathered that the trek to the underworld was a difficult journey and required assistance. While the horse traveled with its rider to the other world and assisted in the journey, the oldest and perhaps most well-trusted horses were disguised as deer in order to lead the way.\textsuperscript{127} This is reminiscent of verse I.165.5 in the Rig Veda, in which the does are harnessed to the front of the chariot, while the horses are harnessed to the sides.\textsuperscript{128}

**Mistress of Animals**

The Mistress of Animals was an anthropomorphic goddess that is often represented as half woman, half snake. Some depictions of her include wings or plant-like features. There are often leopards on either side of her, and animals grow from her sides and up around her shoulders. W.W. Malandra explores the potential capabilities of the Mistress of Animals through the beliefs of the Evenks of Siberia:

… the [clan] mistress governs the clan land and her abode is usually thought to be located under the sacred cosmic tree of the clan where her husband and other herdsmen tend vast numbers of animals of all kinds. Commencing the séance the shaman declares the purpose of his mission, rallies his spirits, and ‘departs for the world where dunne mushun,

\textsuperscript{127} K.V. Chugunov, T.V. Rjabkova, St J. Simpson, “Mounted Warriors,” *Scythians – Warriors of Ancient Siberia*, 199
\textsuperscript{128} *Rig Veda*, 168.
the mistress of the clan land, lives, by penetrating under the roots of the sacred clan-
tree.”

The shaman was on a quest to claim a certain amount of reindeer lives for human survival
throughout the coming year, but he had to gain permission from the mistress. Malandra adds that
the mistress needed to gain the consent of the mother of the universe. “The animals captured by
the shaman instantly turn into woolen threads, shingken, the source of the future catch of the
hunters.” When the shaman returned to the encampment, he shook the woolen threads from his
drum, and the threads turned back into the animals that would now populate the land as a source
of food. The people then sent the shaman back two more times to claim a larger amount of
food.

While many scholars consider the origins of the Mistress of Animals to be in the Ancient Near
East, Yulia Ustinova points to evidence that this goddess originated in Eastern Europe. “In the
Mediterranean world and its environs, the earliest examples of the tendril or snake-limbed
creature appear in Italy, South Russia and the northern Balkans. Only later, in the fourth century,
are they attested in Lycia and on Cyprus.”

In Scythian and Sarmatian art, women are only present under supernatural circumstances, while
men are depicted in daily activities, such as milking livestock, stringing a bow, sealing a pact of

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131 Malandra, 39.
132 Yulia Ustinova, “6 Snake-Limbed and Tendril Limbed Goddesses in the Art and
Mythology of the Mediterranean and Black Sea,” Scythians and Greeks: Cultural Interactions in Scythia, Athens and the
Early Roman Empire (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 75.
blood brotherhood, or engaging in warfare. Esther Jacobson suggests that female representations were immortal or divine figures who exercised power over life and death. “By contrast, when women in Scythian art are associated with animals, the animals are either fantastic, such as griffins or hippocampi; or fearful, such as lions or snakes; or the human female becomes fused with snakes or birds.”

Jacobson explores possibilities on the origins of deer symbolism in connection to a female deity:

> In unwrapping the layers that obscure the image of the deer of the Early Nomads, one finds that it was rooted in a symbolic system revolving around the Animal Mother: the deer-mother as Tree of Life and as source of life and death… With the disappearance of Scytho-Siberian culture, the deer was destined to persist only through the shamanistic tradition of Siberia and Central Asia.

Jacobson’s hypothesis that the Mistress of Animals may have been an earlier Animal Mother embodied in the deer is a possibility. Specifically in reference to images where the deer features the same elements as the Mistress of Animals—animals growing up and out of it; the tree of life growing from its head; panthers twisted around its sides; and the presence of wings. However, Ann Farkas states, “In Siberian nomadic art the deer has been interpreted as a goddess, but despite the ingenuity of the interpretation, little evidence supports this notion. The enthroned goddess who appears with a mounted nomad on the great felt hanging from Pazyryk has been

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considered a representation of a deer goddess, in part because the Tree of Life she holds resembles antlers.”

The goddess holding the Tree of Life can be observed in figure 22, while in figure 23, this same deity is entwined with a tree of life, perhaps in aid of the recumbent figure. It is difficult to say which goddess is depicted in these representations. As noted earlier, Barry Cunliffe maintains that the goddess Tabiti was not personified, but was represented by fire. Tabiti may be representative of the mother of the universe. Argimpasa was visualized as the Mistress of Animals. While the goddess in figures 22 and 23 does not display animal features, she does share the connection to the World Tree iconography as a source of life.

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Many scholars also explore evidence of a Lord of Animals, and Yulia Ustinova contends that this figure is an androgynous female. Various examples are dressed in gowns with the distinctly Scythian style of female headdress. They appear to have female bodies but are disguised with beards. These instances point to androgynous forms of Aphrodite, such as Hermaphroditus. “A bearded Aphrodite was worshiped on Cyprus… and celebrated in Athens in a transvestite rite… Meanwhile, the Scythian Enareis, punished by Aphrodite with the ‘female disease, are manifestly transvestite.”

Ustinova concludes by exploring the nature of therianthropic figures: “[They] are frequently associated with rituals of transition and liminality, or with the intermediate stages of creation, when the world is neither its primal nor its finished state.” A world in flux, and a time when the borders between human and animal were much less defined.

**Conclusion**

The basis for this study began within the semiotics of artifacts. It then expanded outward to the accounts of outsiders, such as Herodotus, and to the similarities across the cultural landscape of the Iron Age. The Cerynitian hind in the story of Heracles and the golden deer in the *Tales of the Narts* presents the connection between the golden-antlered deer or golden deer to a divine female. The pairing of fire and the solar symbol, along with bird-tipped antlers, suggests the
capacity for the deer to fly through the celestial sphere. The practices of late modern indigenous cultures in Central Asia are extremely useful in piecing together the significance of the deer to the Scythians and Sarmatians, and across such a wide timespan the continuity is stunning. Finally, the placement of objects within and around ancient burials, such as the totenreiter, the horse’s antler headdress, and the golden deer, offer evidence for the deer as a guide for the dead along the axis of the World Tree.

The era of the Scythians and Sarmatians was the beginning of the end of interchangeability between humans and other animals. The technology of the weapon and the wheel gave humans the power to claim dominance. Non-human animals were still perceived as guides and symbols of power, but for most people this view would not survive through the common era. In response to this, the significance of the deer in Iron Age Eurasia offers a worldview that challenges our own and emphasizes the interconnectedness of life on earth.
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PUBLISHED WORKS

2018  
Artworks, laurenjbarnhart-art.com

2013  
Memoir, No End of the Bed, Knotted Tree Press

2008 - 2018  
Essays, laurenjbarnhart.com

2011  
“Pentecostal,” Jersey Devil Press

2004  
Poem, “Birth,” Monkey Bicycle 3

2003  
Poem, “Transpose,” Monkey Bicycle 2

1999  
Painting, Georgia O’Keefe, George Fox University Wineskin

ART SHOWS

2021  
Whidbey, Women & Art Benefit Art Show and Sale in support of Soroptimist International, Dancing Fish Vineyards, Freeland, WA

2021  
Benefit Art Auction, Museum of Northwest Art, La Connor, WA

2016  
Artist Trust Benefit Art Auction, Seattle Center, Seattle, WA

2016  
Solo Show, Migration, Sous Sol Winery, Seattle, WA

2015  
Solo Show, Regeneration, The Alibi Room, Seattle, WA

2014 - 2015  
The Best of Gage Exhibition, Gage Academy of Art, Seattle, WA

1998  
Grand Prize, George Fox University Art Competition, Newberg, OR

APPEARANCES

2021  
Panelist, Hacking the Academic Conference, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.

2019  
Presentation, The Totemic Significance of the Deer in Iron Age Scythian and Sarmatian Cultures, Master of Liberal Arts Colloquium, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

2018  
Presentation, The Problem with Purity, American Humanist Association, Annual Conference, Las Vegas, NV

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Presentation, The Elusive Afterlife, Seattle Skeptics and Science Enthusiasts, Seattle, WA

2015  
Interview, Deep Sex Talk with Liam Scheff, Ucy.tv, Truth Frequency Radio, Denver, CO 90.7 FM, Eugene, OR 97.3 FM

2013  
Book Release Party, No End of the Bed, Hugo House, Seattle, WA

EXPERIENCE

2006 - 2020  
Freelance Editor & Consultant, New York, NY & Seattle, WA  
Provided editorial notes for writers of fiction and non-fiction  
Discussed opportunities within the publishing marketplace

2007  
Director of Publishing, La Familia Publishing, Seattle, WA  
Responsible for acquisitions, development, and distribution  
Writer and editor for marketing and public relations

2006  
Artist’s Assistant, Via Max, New York, NY  
Assisted pop artist, Peter Max, with daily inventory  
Collected works from the studio, and arranged for shipment
2005 - 2006  **Literary Agent**, Artists and Artisans Inc., New York, NY  
Represented several clients and built connections in publishing  
Provided extensive editorial notes and plot direction for writers

**EDUCATION**

2018-2019  Master of Liberal Arts, Johns Hopkins University Krieger School of Arts & Sciences, Baltimore, MD  
2013-2014  Fine art and studio practice, Gage Academy of Art, Seattle, WA  
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2001  Bachelor of Science, Interior Design & Fashion Merchandising, Writing & Literature minor, George Fox University, Newberg, OR

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2020-2021  **Student Mentor**, Johns Hopkins University Alumni Association, National  
2020  **Volunteer**, Y-WE Young Women Empowered, Seattle, WA  
Assisted at special events to provide mentorship and career development for diverse young women between the ages of 13-26  
2016  **Studio Monitor**, Gage Academy of Art, Seattle, WA  
Maintained the studio set-up and staging for a 10 week pose  
Collaborated with the artists and the model  
2011-2018  **Leader and Host**, Writer's Group, Seattle WA  
Organized weekly meetings and guided editing sessions  
Provided editorial feedback on participant’s book projects