The Greek historian Herodotus (480/485–425 B.C.), in his History of the Persian Wars, included an excursion on the ethnography of the Scythians and other nomadic groups with whom the Greeks were familiar. Some of the information which Herodotus provided about these nomadic peoples he apparently had gathered during his overland trip to the Black Sea region, which took him as far east as the city of Olbia and the Don River (called the Boryslavka by the Greeks). Much information which he collected must have come second-hand from the Black Sea Greeks who traded with the Scythians, who provided the Greeks with policemen, fish, and wheat, among other things. Other information was apparently hearsay, and reached the Greek world along with such goods as silk, traded from Eastern Asia.

Herodotus described a variety of tribes, naming them and placing them in a geographical framework. But we cannot correlate the names given by Herodotus with specific sites or groups of artifacts, so we will treat the nomads Herodotus names as essentially a homogeneous culture, although there must have been ethnolinguistic variations among them.

The validity of these assumptions is supported by the investigation, as we hope to show below.

The Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological evidence for this investigation comes principally from two regions. The first is the Black Sea region, where the Greeks established settlements from which to trade among local peoples with whom they came into direct contact. The artifacts which we will consider from this region come principally from burials of the rich leaders of the Scythians and other tribes, and date to the 7th through the 4th century B.C. These burial mounds are concentrated in the lower Dniester River area, and on either side of the Kerch Straits (between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov), in the Caucasus Mountains (mostly along the Kuban River) and in the Crimea. In these burials were found objects made by the nomads themselves, as well as many objects made for the Scythians, by Greek and, in earlier periods, by Near Eastern craftsmen. The objects made by non-nomadic craftsmen were probably traded to nomads for foodstuffs and other goods.

The second region rich in pertinent archaeological evidence is the Altai Mountains. The burials in the Altai Mountains—Pazyryk and other sites—contained objects of special interest, which, under most conditions, are lost to archaeologists. Shortly after the burials were completed, they were broken into by thieves, as the rich burials in the Black Sea region often were too. When the graves were robbed, water from the surface entered the underground burial chambers which had been covered with mounds of earth and stone. The water froze in the cold climate of the high mountains and remained permanently frozen due to the insulation of the mound above. Thus, wood, leather, felt, bodies, and other organic substances buried at Pazyryk in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. were still quite well preserved when Russian archaeologists excavated them in the 1920's and 1940's.

The method traditionally used by Minas and other scholars for testing the accuracy of Herodotus' reports has been to read the sections where he describes the Scythians and other nomadic groups (primarily Book IV, chapters 1-140) and compare his descriptions with the archaeological data from the Scythian burials during the 7th through the 4th century B.C.

That is the method we also used.

We cannot include here all of the details Herodotus describes which are substantiated by the archaeological evidence. Instead, we will examine a few passages and try to define the limits of Herodotus' accuracy and usefulness for ethnographic purposes. The passage will be quoted, then followed by the relevant archaeological evidence.
region, and it has been suggested that these people were nomadic only in the summer, returning to the same winter quarters in successive years. Similar hypotheses were put forth about those living in the Altai. But is it likely that their economic base was their livestock, and that the grain traded to the Greeks was grown by local agrarian people whom the Scythians controlled by actual or threatened force of arms? So Herodotus was generally correct in this statement, but probably exaggerated the non-sedentary nature of their lifestyle.

**Arms and Armor**

As a further test of Herodotus' accuracy, we will examine the statement of Book I, chapter 210:

"In their dress and mode of living the Massagetae resemble the Scythians. They fight both on horseback and on foot, neither method is strange to them: they use bows and lances, but their favourite weapon in the battle-axes. Their arms are all either of gold or bronze. For their spearpoints, and arrowheads, and for their battle-axes, they make use of bronze; for head-gear, belts, and girdles, of gold. So too with the carapace of their horses, they give them breastplates of bronze, but employ gold about the reins, the bit, and the cheek-plates. They use neither iron nor silver, having none in their country; but they have bronze and gold in abundance." It is indeed true that gold was plentiful in the Altai, and copper is found in the Caucasus. We can also see, however, from the axe illustrated above, that the Scythians used iron and silver as well as bronze and gold, although they were apparently less common. With the exception of the statement about the use of silver and iron, however, Herodotus recorded information which was accurate as far as it went; however, additional materials of fabrication were used in all the categories Herodotus listed. In this passage, Herodotus seems to generalise from reports and/or observations which were not entirely representative of actual practices.

**Burial Practices**

In Book IV, chapter 71, Herodotus describes the burial customs of the Royal Scythians:

"The tombs of their kings are in the land of the Gerrei, who dwell at the point where the Bysammnes is first navigable. Here, when the king dies, they bury him in the grave, which is in square shape, and of great size. When it is ready, they take the king’s corpse, and having opened the belly, and cleaned out the inside, fill the cavity with a preparation of chopped cypress, frankincense, parasely, and anise, after which they sew up the opening. Then, in the grave, they bury one of their concubines, together with her bed and superstructure; and the corpse is covered with a lot of divers things..."
to the east of the Black Sea. In Book IV, chapter 29, we find the following description:

(There are) "people who dwell at the foot of lofty mountains, who are said to be all—both men and women—bald from their birth, to have flat noses and very long chins. . . . Each of them dwells under a tree, and they cover the tree in winter with a cloth of thick white felt. They are called Agrippaeans."

Clearly these "bald" people were Mongoloids, who would have looked relatively hairless to the Greeks. The felt covering the tree would have been their tents, such as were copied in the interior of Pazyryk burial chambers, which were lined with felt hangings.

Some of the people buried at Pazyryk were Mongoloid; perhaps this passage refers to a people who lived in the Altai Mountains.

In another tomb in the Kuban River basin were found the skeletons of 360 horses, and the burial was not completely excavated. The mound which was put up over the tombs can be illustrated here by the Pazyryk burial.

In discussing a burial ritual, Herodotus says (Book IV, chapters 73 and 75):

"To wash, they make a booth by fixing in the ground three sticks inclined towards one another, and stretching around them woolen felts, which they arrange so as to fit as close as possible: inside the booth a dish is placed upon the ground, into which they put a number of red-hot stones and then add some hemp-seed . . . immediately it smokes, and gives out such a vapour as no Grecian vapour-bath can exceed; the Scyths, delighted, shout for joy."

Here, his information about purpose is a bit garbled, since he obviously has bathing confused with an intoxication ritual. However, he is accurate about the effect of burning hemp and the associated paraphernalia; one of the Pazyryk tombs contained a set of poles, a bronze container filled with stones and hemp seeds, and a cloth covering.

### Eastern Peoples

Herodotus becomes vaguer, but remains useful, as he tries to describe the people far

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### Conclusion

In this brief paper it is not practical to present the comparative archaeological material for each chapter of Herodotus' description of the nomads. The examples given are typical. In summary, we can see that Herodotus gives relatively accurate descriptions of the way of life of the nomads who were in fairly close contact with the Greeks, as, for example, in his description of the burial process. But he is considerably more vague about details of tribes far away, where the evidence he had was hearsay and passed through many hands, as in his discussion of the Agrippaeans. He does, however, have a tendency to exaggerate, or to generalize from specific or unique observations. Nevertheless, from a comparison with currently available archaeological evidence, it is clear that Herodotus as an ethnographer was more often right than wrong.

We can of course evaluate directly only those of his descriptions which record artifacts which can be recovered by archaeologists. He gives other kinds of ethno-linguistic information such as religious rituals and names of gods, methods of warfare, social structures, trade routes, and language groups. Although it is impossible to verify, it is probably safe to assume that Herodotus is as accurate in recording these intangible cultural phenomena as he is in recording artifacts, and that the information he offers is reasonably accurate in many details. We must of course be exceedingly careful in the use of such ethno-linguistic information, since it remains unsupported. However, the fact that Herodotus provides us with information which cannot be recovered by archaeological means, in addition to concrete details like those discussed above, makes his writings especially useful.

Certainly, the work of Herodotus remains invaluable today.

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### Suggested Reading


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1 Censer lodged in the ice of barrow 2. From Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs*, Pl. 42.

2 Copper case on feet, from barrow 2 at Pazyryk. Part of the apparatus used for smoking hashish. From Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs*, Pl. 62A.