



CLOTHING VII. OF THE IRANIAN TRIBES ON THE PONTIC STEPPES AND IN THE CAUCAUS

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The main attention of those who have studied the Iranians of the eastern European steppes has been focused on the headdress and the caftan of the aristocracy. Most of the rich gold ornaments of their costume, as well as detailed representations of them, are connected with the Scythians in the Ukraine in the 4th century b.c.e. and with the [Alans](#) of the 1st and 2nd centuries c.e., two periods when these nomadic peoples were in close contact with Greek colonists around the Black Sea ([PLATE LXXXIV](#)).

The Scythians and related peoples. The Central Asian origin of the Scythians, mentioned by Herodotus (4.11), can be corroborated by means of specific parallels between the costume of the western Scythians and those of the Saka *tigraxaudā* and *haumavargā*, the Bactrians, and the Sogdians of the 6th-4th centuries b.c.e. (see ii, v, vi, above). Three varieties of western Scythian male dress associated with three different groups within the Scythian federation



(the “royal Scythians,” the “nomads,” and the “farmers” [*georgoi*]; Strabo, 7.4.6, 11.2.1; cf. cimmericians) can be distinguished, mainly by the ornamentation of the trousers and the type of headdress. The mentioned parallels with Central Asian costume are to be found only in the clothing of the “royal Scythians,” the easternmost group (concentrated in the eastern Crimea and on the northern shore of the Sea of Azov) and also the most influential.

Both sexes wore caftans open in front (*kurta*), trousers, and a tunic with a round neck opening and long side slits, convenient for riding horses. The Scythian caftan was constructed of two pieces of cloth stitched at the shoulders and at the sides and hemmed. The front normally did not fasten but was wrapped to the left. In a special variant the hem of the caftan tapered to two vertical points in front. The caftan might be made of woolen cloth, textiles woven from hemp, deerskin, or thick felt. In the 1st century c.e. Roman silk began to be used, and in the 4th century linen was introduced. The opening and hem were often trimmed with fringe, rows of gold plaques or beads, and, after the introduction of silk, strips of gold brocade. Sometimes the caftan, and the trousers as well, was quilted from narrow strips of cloth. Winter cloaks (Gk. *sísirna*) were made of sheepskin or the skins of marmots and decorated with beaver, otter, and fox fur. In the 2nd-1st centuries b.c.e. the fashion of fastening them at the shoulder with fibulae was adopted. High boots were fastened by straps that wrapped around the leg; shoes sewn from one or two pieces of leather were fastened with laces. Other distinctive Scythian features were a small knot of hair centered on the forehead and a pair of locks curled in one of two ways flanking the face.

Representations of aristocrats can be identified particularly by special forms of headdress and such jewelry as torques, bracelets, and belts either made of gold or abundantly ornamented with it. Favorite ornamental motifs were animal-combat scenes, chthonic monsters, and the “tree of life.” “Royal Scythians” wore hemispherical headdresses cast from gold and also decorated with mythological themes. The color red was associated with the military aristocracy and predominated in all elements of the warrior’s costume.

The most typical Scythian woman’s headdress consisted of a rigid frame covered with gold plaques ornamented with figural motifs. This “Scythian calathos” (< Gk. *kálathos*, a vase-shaped basket worn on the head), the tiara, and the high conical headdress were always worn with a flowing scarf and gold pendants at the temples. A long skirt opening in front was also typical. An unusual type of cloak was the **candys**, which contrasted with that worn by



other Iranians in having wide, loose sleeves.

From early infancy the clothing of children was covered with beads and gold plaques, and a great number of amulets were attached to their garments. The dead were buried in new sets of ceremonial garments. In the graves of some aristocratic women two to four complete sets of ceremonial dress for different ritual functions were found.

In the 5th-4th centuries b.c.e. Scythian fashions heavily influenced the clothing of the aristocracy of tribes inhabiting the forest and steppe zones of the Ukraine, as well as the Maeotae (Strabo, 5.195, 5.201) of the Kuban region.

The Sarmatians and related peoples. Both the “early Sarmatians” (from the end of the 4th century b.c.e. to the middle of the 1st century c.e.) and the “late Sarmatians” (from the mid-2nd century to the end of 4th century c.e.) were related to the Massagetae and [Dahae](#) of the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea. During this period items of clothing similar to those worn by Scythians and also to some degree by Parthians and ancient Bactrians were widely diffused: short cloaks, caftans opening in front, loose trousers, headdresses with one or two disks over the forehead. The Sarmatians also sometimes bought clothing readymade from Greek merchants (Strabo, 11.2.3). The late Sarmatians wore high boots and leather stockings, shoes with turned-up toes, or high felt boots. At the end of the 2nd century c.e. a sleeveless dress fastened at each shoulder with a fibula was adopted by the women. Both men and women covered their bodies with tattoos (Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 22.2.), and children were tattooed in infancy (Sextus Empiricus, 3.202). Layers of red paint have been discovered on several excavated female corpses.

During the same period several waves of newcomers from the depths of Central Asia, whom the ancient writers called [Alans](#) and who are not to be confused with the Sarmatians, appeared. The first group, led by a chieftain named Anavsi, began to settle along the Kuban river at about the turn of the 1st century b.c.e. were followed by Alano-“Scythians,” who were to be found in the region of the lower Don in the 1st and early 2nd centuries c.e. In subsequent waves elements connected with the Huns, tribes from the region between the Sayan and Altai mountains, and the Yuezhi of Bactria (see [chinese-iranian relations i. in pre-islamic times](#)) settled farther west.

There were common features in the costume of these four migrating populations. Men wore a shirt made from a single piece of cloth with a deep



triangular opening at the neck and a traditional tailored caftan with a front closing, its seams masked by gold beads strung on leather thongs. The cloak was fastened on the right shoulder. Women wore a dress that reached below the knees, with long, narrow sleeves and an opening over the breast; full trousers decorated with vertical rows of beads; and coats of varying lengths. In contrast to the men, they fastened the cloak on the left shoulder. There were no pockets in this costume; objects were suspended from the belt in specially made containers. The hair was generally worn in two plaits.

The shape of the dress worn by Sarmatians and Alans and the general style of ornamentation had a great influence on neighboring groups—Greeks, Maeotae, late Scythians. It can be traced in clothing of all social strata. Many aspects of this costume were still preserved by the Alans in the Middle Ages and by their descendants, the modern Ossetes.

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