



## MASSAGETAE

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**MASSAGETAE** (Gk. *Massagétai*), a mighty nomadic tribe reckoned to be Scythians already by Herodotus (1.201, 1.204.1; see also Stephanus Byzantius, s.v.), who settled somewhere in the wide lowlands to the east of the Caspian Sea and the southeast of the Aral Sea on the Ust-Urt Plateau and the Kyzylkum Desert, in particular probably between the Oxus (Āmū Daryā) and Jaxartes (Syr Daryā) rivers. But the exact localization of the Massagetae is rather problematic for a number of reasons: e.g., the information of the ancient authors mentioning them is not always precise enough; the last source cannot be ascertained in every particular case; Herodotus' report, our main source, seems to be based partly on Hecataeus of Miletus (q.v.) and partly on oral informants, and the whole is often mixed up. One main point in issue is the question what river is meant by the name *Aráxēs*, which is often given as the northern frontier of the Achaemenid Empire, beyond which the Massagetae lived: the Oxus (thus, e.g., Herrmann, 1914, p. 8; 1930, cols. 2125 f.), the Jaxartes, or even the Volga (but maybe also the Aras [see ARAXES]; see Herrmann, 1914, p. 18 n. 1); and this question is further complicated by the fact that the course of the Oxus in antiquity is not absolutely clear, since some sources speak of its flow into the Caspian Sea. Therefore scholars localize the Massagetae partly around the Oxus delta or the Jaxartes delta, partly between the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea or even more to the north or northeast, but in any case without really conclusive arguments. Wherever they may have lived, obviously they had invaded that land from the east, since they are said to have besieged the Scythians, who then withdrew westwards (Herodotus 4.11.1).



The information on the Massagetae given by Greek (or Graeco-Roman) sources is of greatly varying value (although it is to be obtained in any case from the reports on Cyrus's campaign against them, as we read already in Strabo 11.6.2, 11.8.6) and is often contradictory. The most detailed description is found in Herodotus, who, however, does not reveal his sources. He expounds his account about the Massagetae in the section (esp. 1.202–14), where Cyrus II (q.v.) waged war on them (possibly to make safe former conquests in Chorasmia and Sogdiana). The course of that campaign is not known in detail (but cf. Iustinus 1.8; Polyaeus, *Strategica* 8.28). After first having asked for their queen Tomyris's hand in vain, Cyrus crossed the frontier and in the end fell in the decisive battle, when also the major part of his army has been destroyed by Tomyris (Herodotus 1.214.2–3). They seem to have been subjugated by Darius I (thus Polyaeus 7.11.6) and from then on were part of the Achaemenid Empire, but they are not mentioned as such in the various lists of lands or peoples. They must be included in one of the diverse Saka groups distinguished there, maybe the *Sakā tigraxaudā* “with the pointed caps” (thus Junge, 1939, p. 80, etc.). But one should not overlook that among the 24 nations depicted on the plinth of the famous Darius statue as no. 12 are listed “Saka of the marshes and Saka of the plains” with an expression that reminds one of Strabo 11.8.6, who distinguishes four groups of Massagetae living on the islands, the marshes, the mountains, and the plains.

The name *Massagétai* mostly and most plausibly is explained as the plural form (containing the suffix East Ir. \*-tā, reflected in Gk. -tai) of \**Masiā-ka-*, which can be understood as a regular derivation with Ir. \*-ka- from \**masiā-* “fish” (= YAv. *masiia-*, Ved. *mátsya-* “id.”; cf., i.a., Marquart, 1905, p. 78 and 240). This lexeme does not describe the people explicitly, however, as “fish-eaters”; owing to the basic function of the suffix (and to parallel formations) one may just as well think of “being concerned with fish, i.e., fishing, fisherman”. Also the other objection raised, that instead of \**masiā-* a derivation from Ir. \**kapa-* “fish” (cf. Oss. *kæf*) would be expected, is not decisive. More important is that the Massagetae are expressly said to eat primarily (raw) fishes, plenty of which are found in the Oxus river (see also Schmitt, 2006, p. 251). Other interpretations of the name that can be found here and there (see Kothe, pp. 58f.), are linguistically unacceptable. Moreover it should be added that *Massagé-tai* looks like the Grecized plural form of the personal name *Masságēs* (Herodotus 7.71; see Schmitt, 2011, p. 247; Humbach and Faiss, p. 12).

During Alexander's campaign in the far north-east in 329/28 BCE there were rebellions of the Sogdians, Bactrians, and Massagetae behind him headed by some Spitamenes, after whose murder the Massagetae submitted to Alexander again (Arrianus 4.16–17; Curtius Rufus 8.1.3–8; Strabo 11.8.8). From this it may be concluded that they were neighbors of the Sogdians and Bactrians. For others, they were in contact with the Chorasmians (Strabo 11.8.8; Curtius Rufus 8.1.8), Arachosians, and Bactrians (Eratosthenes apud Strabo, l.c.). But in general their later fate is more or less unknown, since all information found from Seleucid times on seems to be based on earlier sources. This applies also to Strabo, whose thorough report is not based directly, however, on Herodotus (notwithstanding all agreements), but on some other common source, perhaps a revised version of Hecataeus, as Herrmann (1914, pp. 11–17) could show by a detailed comparison, because Strabo's report in contrast to Herodotus seems to be a unified and well-structured whole.

Later the Massagetae seem to have become absorbed into the Dahae (q.v.), who once appear in an inscription of Xerxes (XPh 26), but are known to the Greeks only from Alexander's time on, and finally they are no more mentioned at all, since those Dahae became the most influential power of that region. In Roman times the Massagetae are only known and mentioned as one of the notable Scythian tribes (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.50; Pomponius Mela 1.13), and Ammianus Marcellinus (22.8.38, 23.5.16, 31.2.12) identifies them with the Alans of his time (cf. also Cassius Dio 69.15). For Stephanus Byzantius (s.vv.) the *Apasiákai* (who already Polybius 10.48 has between Oxus and Tanais) and the *Augásioi* are Massagetian subdivisions, and probably also the *Dérbikes* were part of them, because according to Ctesias (q.v.; frag. 9, par. 7) Cyrus's campaign was directed against that tribe.

Somewhat strange is the localization of the Massagetae in Ptolemy's *Geography* 6.10.2 in Margiana, and still more in 6.13.3, where he calls them a Saka tribe along the *Askatánkas* mountains, i.e., Hindu Kush and Karakorum. In the end, various Byzantine authors use the name of the Massagetae in a quite archaizing manner for Huns (q.v.), Turks, Tatars, and related peoples (see Moravcsik, pp. 183f.), what has no relevance, however, for ancient times.

According to Strabo 11.8.6 (and Herodotus 1.216.3–4 [see above]) the Massagetae lived in a country irrigated by the various branches of the “*Aráxēs*” river (see above) partly on the plains, partly on the mountains, partly in the marshes formed by the river(s), and partly on the islands therein. He distinguishes also quite exactly (11.8.7) what food those different groups eat



and what clothes they wear. They are pastoral people and fishermen, but are not farming. Some make their living by fishing and clothe themselves in the skins of seals; the others are breeding sheep for the milk and the wool, from which they produce their clothing, but they live also on root vegetables and wild fruits.

They worship only the sun god and sacrifice him horses (Herodotus 1.212.3, 1.216.4). They are brave warriors (as they proved in the struggle with Cyrus II), fight on foot and by horse, with bow and arrow, spear and battle-axe. They have golden headdress, belts, shoulder straps, and even harness as well as bronze horse armor, spearheads, and arrowheads, but strikingly they are said to refrain from using iron and silver.

In principle they are monogamous, but it seems that promiscuity in the sex life was common custom (Herodotus 1.216.1, 4.172.2; Aelianus, *Nat. anim.* 6.60). It is remarkable that Herodotus added here the statement, that what the Greeks say about the Scythians, in fact are customs of the Massagetae. Who did die of an illness, is buried (Herodotus 1.216.3) or food for wild beasts (Strabo 11.8.6), but old men becoming too old are sacrificed and cooked and eaten together with the meat of the other sacrificial animals (*ibid.*).

As Scythians (or Sakas) the Massagetae spoke an Iranian language (cf. SCYTHIAN LANGUAGE); but apart from the name *Massagétai* (see above) we know only two personal names, that of queen *Tómyris* and of her son *Spargapísēs* (cf. Scyth. *Sparga-peíthēs*). In contrast to Herrmann, 1930, col. 2127 the name of (OPers.) *Skunxa-*, the leader of the Saka with the pointed caps (*tigraxaudā*; see above) should be kept away, however, as long as the identity of the Massagetae with the *Tigraxaudā* is not established beyond doubt.

In short, the Massagetae are straightforward, uncouth, savage, and warlike people (as Strabo 11.8.7 has it), but in business dealings they are frank and no tricksters.

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