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SCYTHIANS AND CIVILIZATION

Renate Rolle, *The World of the Scythians*. Translated by F.G. Wells. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1989

For anyone interested in rounding out their knowledge of the Scythian role in civilization, *The World of the Scythians* is the place to start. Renate Rolle, who wrote this book in German in 1980, has brought the latest in archaeological scholarship to the understanding of the Scythian civilization that flourished on the doorstep of the Ancient Greeks and Persians. Like other studies based on archaeology, this analysis of the Scythians shows them to be less menacing and more human in their way of life than do the histories written by Greek outsiders in the Fourth Century BC.

The great value of Rolle's work has been to include a detailed review of Soviet archaeology on the Scythians. Since their ancestral lands occupy the area north of the Black and Caspian Seas, most of the research on the Scythians has been located in territory that until recently was the Soviet Union. Moreover, as Rolle highlights in her introduction, at times the Russian people have been viewed as the inheritors of Scythian fierceness and independence. Hence, in opening up to English speakers the rich detail of Soviet archaeology on the Scythians, Rolle has offered a work of inestimable value to scholars who otherwise would find the Soviet sources inaccessible.

This archaeological data is more reliable than historical authors, such as Herodotus, who wrote at length of the Scythians after his stay with them. Rolle mixes and matches the written record with archaeological remains in order to sift what is true in the written history from what is likely an exaggeration. The same method allows for a reliable interpretation of artefacts, and of the depictions of Scythian daily life that are found on the artefacts. The two data sources together serve as criteria for critique and verification.

Because I have utilized a similar methodology in one of my own books, I know how demanding such a method can be for the author. Rolle deserves considerable praise for her judicious handling of the method. My only wish is that she had availed herself of the third support for ethnoarchaeology. If she had consulted with contemporary peoples who still follow a similar life style and had incorporated more of the ecological factors of life in the Scythian plains, the book would have been enriched.

Moreover, use of comparison with contemporary studies of contact between civilizations might have better answered questions about what happened to the Scythians, why they have disappeared and what survives of their culture. Rolle's focus on archaeology, I think, obscures these types of questions that have more to do with civilizational studies and history than with examination of ancient burial sites and review of the data from archaeological digs. Thus, this book exemplifies both the strengths and the weaknesses of the archaeological method. We know a great

deal about minutiae and verifiable aspects of life, but are never provided with the macrohistorical overview that evaluates the impact of Scythians upon the civilizational process.

Still, something is better than nothing. A truer assessment of the Scythians is possible after reading this book, which is reason enough to recommend it. Lavishly arrayed with maps, pictures, some in full color, and diagrams of the positioning of important artefacts, this is an attractive package for a serious book.

Of particular importance are the chapters on the physical appearance of the Scythians and the importance of horses to their culture. Rolle states that they were not Mongol peoples as is frequently suggested. Rather, they had racial affinity to Iranian peoples. She proves her point by recovery of artefacts and mummies from the mounded tombs or kurgans that are the principal archaeological sources for what has been discovered about the Scythians.

Careful analysis of the artefacts and mummies left in the kurgans show the advanced techniques of the Scythians in preservation of the bodies, their sophisticated use of surgical techniques and the frequency of war wounds among men and woman alike. Such archaeologically derived knowledge is not readily available from chroniclers like Herodotus and Ovid. The Scythians were expert in the working of gold and had abundant resources for the time, making them relatively rich in the Ancient world for a tribal society.

Horses held together a Scythian economy that depended on the animal for food, mobility and military advantage. Rolle suggests that the Scythians valued horses highly and that the practice of sacrificing large numbers of them upon entombment of rulers and warriors transferred this importance to the symbolic realm of religion. Horses bred for speed and endurance; iron weapons; and usefulness as mercenaries in wars among their enemies, were sources of prosperity and influence for Scythian kings.

Perhaps more importantly, the virtues of savage bravery and fierce independence that characterized Scythian culture were centered around horsemanship, hunting, and warfare. Rolle's text suggests that the ostentatious use of feathers, armor, gold and jewelry were not incidental to a culture that depended for survival upon striking fear and terror in its enemies. Rolle also introduces the models for the Greek Amazons. She considers them to have been Scythian women with specialized roles that intertwined controlled savagery with warfare.

The least satisfying aspect of this book is the author's decision to record rather than describe or analyze the disappearance of the Scythians. She provides a three-page historical outline that begins with the Scythian invasion of the Black Sea lands, driving out the Cimmerians in the process. Highlighting kings and the participation of the Scythians in the histories of Persia, Greece and Rome, the outline abruptly ends with the destruction in the Third Christian century of Neapolis Scythica, possibly by Ostrogoths. But in the text, the author has already noted that Scythian culture lacked vitality and was demographically in decline at the time of Ovid's exile there around 9 A.D.

As best as I can interpret the scanty information provided by Rolle, Scythian defiance of Persians and Greeks proved a dangerous game. Both powers had an

interest in dislodging the Scythians from certain key areas around the Black Sea, forcing them to the north of what became the Crimea. This began with the campaign of Philip of Macedon in 339 B.C. Although relocated, the Scythians continued to control huge areas in the access routes between Persia and the Greek hegemony in Asia Minor. But after the establishment of the Roman Empire among the Scythians, we are never told of how or if Christianity had a role in eclipsing Scythian power or if their economic resources dwindled to a point of irrelevance. Thus the book ends with abundant loose ends.

Despite these limitations, I heartily recommend this book. It fills up gaps in much that is known of the Scythian role in civilization. With the foundation provided by Rolle, it is possible to sketch out an hypothesis of the role of these and other tribal peoples located at the peripheries of civilizations. As the world systems approach has demonstrated, such peoples have a much more important role in history than the written records of the so-called civilized nations would allow. In the last analysis, the "world" of the Scythians is our world too.

Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo