

Sarmatian Roundels and Sarmatian Art

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OF A CERTAIN tribe of nomads Herodotus wrote: "Their arms are all either of gold or brass. For their spearpoints, and arrowheads, and for their battle-axes, they make use of brass; for headgear, belts, and girdles, of gold. So too with the caparison of their horses, they give them breastplates of brass, but employ gold about the reins, the bit, and the cheek-plates."¹ A splendid roundel recently acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art must once have been a glittering adornment in such a set of trappings (Figure 1).

The roundel, 13.1 cm. in diameter, is of silver covered with gold foil, on a bitumen backing originally covered with iron; turquoise stones or colored paste inlays, not completely preserved, decorate the border and the inner zones (see technical notes at end of article). While the repoussé design at first glance looks abstract, it is actually composed of the figures of five animals (Figure 2). At the center, one, probably a deer, is coiled up so that its head, in profile, faces its rear legs; its front legs are bent one to each side. A circle of arch-shaped inlays separates the deer from the four feline animals that creep nose to tail around the outer zone of the roundel, their feet lying along the ring of arch-shaped cells at the edge of the disk. These animals of the outer zone have frontally depicted heads and profile bodies. They are virtually identical except that one opposed pair, probably lions, has teardrop-shaped eyes and rounded ears, while the other opposed pair has rounded eyes and teardrop-shaped ears. These last seem to be griffins, for they have bird beaks rather than

feline muzzles. The bodies of the animals are composed of separate geometric forms placed in proximity to each other; eyes, ears, ribs, and feet are inlay cells with clear-cut shapes like the other elements of the animals' bodies. The inner and outer circles of arch-shaped inlays complete the surface patterning and coloring. This even distribution of pattern and color produces the impression of abstract decoration that first strikes one. Such an impression is augmented by the differences in the colors of the inlays; this may have been an intention of the object's creator and not an accident of time. In its present state, the griffins seem to have inlays of lighter color at the ribs and darker color in the hindquarters, while the lions have darker ribs and lighter hindquarters. If these contrasts were intentional, they would seem to favor again the decorative effect rather than the content, for the color differences tear the animals apart rather than make them more readable.

Although the roundel is said to have come from Iran, its closest parallels are objects discovered in Russia. A pair of cast gold roundels in the treasure of Peter the Great, in the Hermitage, Leningrad, is probably not far removed from the sources of what may be called Sarmatian roundels of Siberian type.²

The central animal of the Siberian pair, again a

1. Herodotus I. 215.

2. K. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes* (New York, 1967) pp. 184-197. S. I. Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kollektsiia Petra I* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962) pp. 12-16, 42-43; pls. III, 1; V, 4.

coiled deer (Figure 3), is represented in a naturally modeled manner so that it is easy enough to identify it; surrounding this figure are four pairs of a feline creature with frontal head and profile body attacking a profile wolf-like creature. The design is framed by a complex pattern whose major motif is arch-shaped inlay cells; the inlays on this piece are turquoise except for the animals' eyes, which are black glass or stone. It is quite likely that the Metropolitan's roundel was copied from some such plaque, whose design was changed so as to simplify the outer border, to eliminate one animal from the complicated combat groups, and to abstract the ring of feet around the central deer into an ornamental circle of inlays similar to the edging. This abstraction was necessary since the orientation of the animals on the Metropolitan's roundel differs from that of the Siberian plaques; here the animals have their paws placed against the outer border rather than toward the central deer, so that an inner circle of feet would be superfluous. The Metropolitan's roundel is less natural, less freely and complexly composed. Compared to the Siberian pieces, the workmanship of the roundel is schematic and somewhat coarse, and fewer figures are fitted into more space. Yet aside from the technical differences, the pieces are too similar not to share a common artistic tradition, a tradition in which color and decorative effect outweigh content.

There are in the Peter the Great treasure several smaller cast gold roundels related to the larger pair.³ On some of the smaller pieces, the central animal figure is replaced by a large stone inlay; on others, the coiled animal has become the entire decoration. In Rudenko's opinion, the two large roundels, a set of four with central stone setting (about 5 cm. in diameter), and a similar but smaller pair (about 3.5 cm.) were probably clothing decorations; all these pieces are similar enough to have formed one stylistic group. Rudenko considers the coiled animal attachments to be harness decorations; of these there are at least sixteen related pieces (roughly 3.5 to 5 cm. in diameter). Thus there is in the Peter the Great treasure at least one set of trappings



FIGURE 1

Sarmatian gilded silver roundel, third-first centuries B.C. Diameter 13.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, 1970.132

for a nomad and his horse, trappings reminiscent of those described by Herodotus.

The often-discussed difficulties of dealing with the Peter the Great treasure make it impossible to specify the cultural center or nomadic group in which these gold ornaments were produced.⁴ The gold was robbed from graves located somewhere within the area from modern Kazakhstan to the Altai Mountains; the various roundels, being among the early finds, may have come from the region between the Irtysh and Ob' rivers. Rudenko's dates for the roundels are fifth-third centuries B.C.; other scholars prefer a fourth-third centuries B.C. dating.⁵

3. Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kollektsiia*, pp. 12-16, 42-44, 50-51; pls. III, 2-3; IV, 1; VIII, 2; XXIII, 23-25, 28-31, 36-37.

4. For a summary of the history of the treasure, with bibliography, J. F. Haskins, "Sarmatian Gold Collected by Peter the Great:—VII; The Demidov Gift and Conclusions," *Artibus Asiae* 22 (1959) pp. 64-78. Also Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 179-197,

and Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kollektsiia*, pp. 7-12. Most of the small roundels were included in the list of objects sent by Gargarin in 1716; the large roundels had been acquired by 1741, at which time they were included in the first catalogue of the treasure.

5. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 179-197. Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kollektsiia*, pp. 13-14, 16, 28-36. Rudenko compares the large

Another group of objects related to the Metropolitan's roundel was excavated in 1962, in a cemetery near Novochoerkassk on the lower Don River, on the steppes far to the west of Siberia.⁶ The Sadovy Kurgan had a low earth mound about 2.2 meters in height; the burial was in a rectangular pit covered with wood planks. Although the grave had been robbed in antiquity, objects from the burial feast were preserved under the mound, at the original ground level. These finds included eight late Hellenistic silver wine bowls and two large gold-foil covered phalerae and twelve small ones, all now in the Rostov Museum (Figure 4). The excavator, Kaposhina, classified the burial as Sarmatian, since the Sarmatians ruled over this region of the steppes in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C. She dated the grave at the end of the first century B.C. but thought that the finds, particularly the silver bowls, were earlier. Kaposhina suggested that the Hellenistic silver could have come to the Don as a result of Sarmatian participation in the Mithridatic wars of the first half of the first century B.C.⁷ If her dating is reliable, the lower limits of the Peter the Great roundels ought then to be reduced to the first century B.C., since both groups of objects have closely related decoration.

However, the technique of the Sadovy Kurgan roundels is distinctive. Siberian goldwork of these centuries is generally cast, but the Sadovy Kurgan pieces are of hammered silver covered with gold leaf, the technique of the Metropolitan's roundel.⁸ In the center of the pair of large phalerae, which measure about 10.5 cm. in diameter, two profile griffins attack a feline animal with frontal head; fifteen profile feline animals

roundels to a carved wooden clothing ornament of circular form from a kurgan at Katanda in the Altai Mountains. This kurgan is usually dated no earlier than the third century B.C. See S. V. Kiselev, *Drevniaia istoriia iuzhnoi Sibiri* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1949) pp. 185–189.

6. S. I. Kaposhina, "A Sarmatian Royal Burial at Novochoerkassk," *Antiquity* 38 (1963) pp. 256–258, pls. xxix–xxxii.

7. See also T. Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians* (London, 1970) pp. 122, 141.

8. According to Kaposhina, "Sarmatian Royal Burial," p. 257. In *Historische Schätze aus der Sowjetunion* (Essen, 1967) some of the burial finds were catalogued under no. 201, pp. 86–87, and described as "Kleine runde Goldphalera, auf Kupferscheibchen gearbeitet, mit der Darstellung von Tieren; Goldphalera auf Silberscheibchen mit Tiermotiven; Goldphalera auf Kupferscheibchen mit Tiermotiven; Goldphalera auf Eisenscheibchen mit Tiermotiven."



FIGURE 2
Drawing of Sarmatian roundel

FIGURE 3
Drawing of cast gold roundel from the Peter the Great treasure, third-first centuries B.C. Diameter about 12 cm. Hermitage, Leningrad



with frontal heads surround this motif, and twenty bird heads decorate the rim. The smaller phalerae show simply the central motifs of the larger, and on all the pieces turquoise and other stones are set into the eyes, ears, ribs, and feet. Like the Peter the Great roundels, the Sadovy finds constitute a set of trappings for a nomad or his horse, and again the designs are a more complex version of that of the Metropolitan's roundel. The Peter the Great and Sadovy roundels may well have been produced by two nomadic tribes, perhaps two widely separated branches of Sarmatians. The designs and the level of craftsmanship are similar, but the Peter the Great pieces are cast in the fashion of most Siberian goldwork while the Sadovy pieces are

FIGURE 4
Gilded silver roundels from Sadovy Kurgan, Novochoerkassk, first century B.C. Diameter of large roundel about 10.5 cm. Rostov Museum

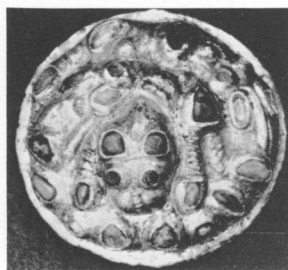


FIGURE 5
Drawing of bronze roundel said to come from Iran, second-first centuries B.C. Diameter 12 cm. Azizbeghlou Collection, Teheran

gilded hammered silver, perhaps a Pontic technique. A workshop in the area of Novochoerkassk (Tanais?) may have produced the Sadovy phalerae along with the well-known Novochoerkassk treasure from the Khokhlach Kurgan. Stylistic details of the Sadovy roundels are closely paralleled on some of the Novochoerkassk pieces.⁹

Other related objects in this group are a number of small gold roundels from burials in the Kuban region of the northwest Caucasus. These burials were casually excavated and sketchily reported in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so that they are useful only as evidence of Sarmatian infiltration into the Pontic region.¹⁰ The roundels are generally described as repoussé gold over bronze, with a coiled or creeping animal decorated with turquoise or blue paste inlays. Their diameters correspond to the smaller roundels of

9. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 59, 63. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians*, pp. 155-158, pls. 41-44. For Siberian cast gold technique, see V. P. Shilov, "Kalinovskii kurgannyi mogil'nik," *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheolog'ii SSSR* 60 (Moscow, 1959) p. 490.

10. E. H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks* (New York, 1971) pp. 223-224, 230-232; further references p. 277, note 2. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians*, pp. 123-128.

the Sadovy Kurgan and the Peter the Great treasure. One reasonably well described burial, Zubov's kurgan excavated in 1899, serves to illustrate the uses of these objects.¹¹ Near the skeleton lay seven gold plaques with loops on the back, probably belt decorations; these were adorned with colored glass insets in the center and bordered by small stones of colored paste surrounded by gold wire designs.¹² Also alongside the skeleton were five small gold roundels with Siberian-type creeping griffins in relief; these were decorated with incrustations. The owner of the grave apparently wore a belt decorated with two different styles of plaques, Greek and Siberian, the same stylistic mixture found in the Sadovy Kurgan grave gifts. To complete his jewelry, at each side of the skeleton lay a gilded silver roundel about 10 cm. in diameter, with a cross-shaped pattern hammered out in relief.¹³ A tentative date for this burial and for the other Kuban roundels would be second–first centuries B.C.

In addition to the roundels from the steppe regions, a few other pieces related to the Metropolitan's roundel are said to have been discovered in Iran. One of these, a bronze plaque recently exhibited in Japan, has a central design of a feline creature attacking its prey; frontal feline heads decorate the outer zone, and inlays are visible in the eyes, ears, feet, and parts of the bodies.¹⁴ The Japanese roundel would seem to be stylistically close to the Metropolitan's, although the Japanese piece is more crudely worked. If the provenance is correct, the two pieces may represent the products of an Iranian workshop whose craftsmen drew upon Sarmatian animal-style examples but drastically simplified them.

A final roundel of Siberian type, in the Azizbeghlou

collection, is said to have been found in the southwest Caspian region of Iran. This piece is bronze, 12 cm. in diameter, and decorated with a repoussé relief of three griffin heads joined into a central circle (Figure 5).¹⁵ Around the outer edge is a ring of semicircular cells, and other cells appear on the body of the disk. The backing is also bronze, with traces of lost loops for attachment, and the bitumen filling is partly preserved. Ghirshman considers the roundel to be Sarmatian and dates it second century B.C.–first century A.D.

Of all the roundels discussed here, this example is least typical of the Siberian-style group. It is true that the border resembles that on the Metropolitan's roundel, and the circle formed by the griffin heads perhaps reflects the coiled animals in the central zones of the other roundels (Figures 2–4), but on the Azizbeghlou roundel the design is clearly readable, and the decorative effects of surface pattern and color are not primary. It is difficult to interpret this distinction; it may be one of date, of workshop, or of artistic tradition. Yet even if the roundel is not definitely Siberian in style, its motif has Siberian associations. A pair of gilded silver phalerae in the Hermitage, 24 cm. in diameter, is decorated with a griffin coiled around so that its fore- and hindquarters meet to form a circle (Figure 6).¹⁶ The phalerae were discovered in 1884 in the region of Kuibyshev on the Volga, as part of a small buried treasure. Despite the findspot, Trever has classified these pieces as Graeco-Bactrian; she dates them in the last third of the second century B.C. on the basis of Chinese comparisons.

An earlier Siberian prototype for the motif appears on a carved wooden frontlet from Kurgan I at Tuekta in the Altai Mountains (Figure 7).¹⁷ The frontlet, dated

11. "Raskopka kurganov' na Zubovskom' khutor' v' Kuban'skoi oblasti," *Izvestiia imperatorskoi arkhelogicheskoi komissii* 1 (1901) pp. 94–103.

12. For related goldwork, Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, p. 215, fig. 117; according to him, the style is Greek. See also, for similar goldwork dated second century B.C., *Historische schätze*, no. 202, p. 87, pls. 39–40.

13. Six related roundels were found in the Akhtanizovskii treasure in the northwest Caucasus; the treasure was a mixture of Greek and Sarmatian objects like the Zubov finds. A. Spitsyn', "Falary iuzhnoi Rossii," *Izvestiia imperatorskoi arkhelogicheskoi komissii* 29 (1909) pp. 19–23, figs. 1–32.

14. Catalogue of an exhibition sponsored by the Japanese Committee for the 2500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire (1971), no. 101, circular plaque, green bronze,

Azerbaijan, diameter 13.9 cm. The back of the plaque is iron and has three loops arranged in the same position as on the Metropolitan's roundel. Reputedly from Iran, the plaque has been in the collection of Kojire Ishiguro, Tokyo, for about twelve years.

15. R. Ghirshman, "Disque en bronze à décor ternaire," *Forschungen zur Kunst Asiens*, eds. O. Aslanapa and R. Naumann (Istanbul, 1969) pp. 9–17.

16. R. D. Barnett, "The Art of Bactria and the Treasure of the Oxus," *Iranica Antiqua* 8 (1968) pp. 34–53. K. V. Trever, *Pamiatniki greko-baktriiskogo iskusstva* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1940) pp. 48–50, pls. 3–5.

17. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 120–124, 131–135. S. I. Rudenko, *Kul'tura naseleniia tsentral'nogo Altaia v skifskoe vremia* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1960) pp. 124–125, pl. CI, 1.



FIGURE 6
Graeco-Bactrian gilded silver phalera, second century B.C. Diameter 24 cm. Hermitage

late sixth–early fifth centuries B.C., is decorated with a pair of griffin protomes coiled around a central boss; the piece was part of a set of horse trappings in a princely nomadic burial. The wood carvings in the nomadic graves of the Scythian period in the Altai Mountains were often gold covered and seem to have been imitations of more elaborately made foreign objects.

The Metropolitan's roundel and the other Iranian pieces may represent a group of Iranian-produced objects, based upon the more elaborate Sarmatian pieces, which were in turn derived from earlier Siberian decorative arts. If the hypothetical Iranian workshop produced roundels of different styles, this might be explained by the great distances between the stylistic centers on the steppes and Persia; the workshop would have been too far removed to reflect exclusively any one nomadic style. On the other hand, it is possible that stylistic uniformity was of little importance at this time, at least among the inhabitants of the steppes.

Unfortunately, the Sarmatians and other nomads of the steppes have left us little evidence of their history, much less their art; aside from archaeological remains, which are often difficult to interpret, most of our infor-

FIGURE 7

Carved wooden frontlet, Kurgan I, Tuekta, Altai Mountains, sixth-fifth centuries B.C. Diameter 12 cm. Hermitage



mation must be derived indirectly from the records of the high civilizations who knew the nomads. It can be argued that the Iranian roundels were not inspired by Sarmatian examples but were rather the inspiration for them, that they were the simple prototypes later to be elaborated into such pieces as those of the Sadovy Kurgan and Peter the Great treasure. At present, the evidence is too scanty to support more than a general dating for all Siberian-type roundels in the third–first centuries B.C.; no reliable relative chronology can be established.

The Sadovy Kurgan group of objects, which can be dated by its archaeological context, is probably early first century B.C. On the basis of stylistic analysis, the Peter the Great pieces have been assigned dates varying from the fifth through the third century B.C., and the Azizbeghlou roundel has been dated second century B.C.–first century A.D. Some of the smaller roundels in the Peter the Great treasure are said to have positive textile impressions on the reverse; the technique used in casting such pieces is thought to have been confined to the third century B.C., according to the one reliable chronology so far worked out for Siberian goldwork.¹⁸

18. E. Bunker, "Animal Style Art of the Far East," in E. Bunker, B. Chatwin, and A. Farkas, *"Animal Style" Art from East to West* (New York, 1970) pp. 109–110. See also E. Bunker and J. Ternbach, "A Variation of the 'Lost-Wax' Process," *Expedition* 12, 3 (1970) pp. 41–43.

The Novocherkassk treasure, with which the Sadovy Kurgan roundels have stylistic affinities, is presently dated in the first century B.C. at the earliest, and sometimes as late as first–second centuries A.D.¹⁹ If we adopt the latest date that has been suggested for the Peter the Great roundels, the third century B.C., then the Sadovy Kurgan pieces must be two centuries later, an amazingly long time span to separate two such similar groups of objects. Yet the Sadovy Kurgan finds cannot be too much older than the early first century B.C., if the date of their archaeological context and of the associated pieces in the Novocherkassk treasure is correct. And the Peter the Great roundels cannot be too far removed in time from the Siberian artistic traditions demonstrated in the fourth century B.C. Pazyryk kurgans, with their many examples of emphasis on frontality, a love of color and decorative form, animal combat compositions, and circular plaques with high relief in the center.²⁰ We can hope that future discoveries will clarify the chronology and allow us to decide whether indeed the Iranian roundels were the offspring of earlier Sarmatian trappings.

A gold torque in the Peter the Great treasure, probably dated fourth century B.C., helps to illustrate the links between Sarmatian polychrome metalwork and earlier art.²¹ Each terminal of the torque, in cast gold, is shaped like a couchant feline animal; its tail ends in a griffin head, and its ears, ribs, and other body surfaces are set with inlay cells for colored decoration (Figure 8). Scholars have compared the torque with objects from the contemporary burials at Pazyryk, as well as with pieces in the Oxus treasure; the torque is clearly an example of native Siberian goldwork influenced by Achaemenid art. The feline creatures on the torque are also related to those on the Metropolitan's



FIGURE 8

Detail of cast gold terminal of torque from the Peter the Great treasure, fourth century B.C. Hermitage

roundel. The creeping posture is similar, as are the squarish contours of the creatures; on the Metropolitan's roundel, the inlay cells are enlarged and simplified, but similarly shaped.

The subject of Sarmatian polychromy has been discussed by many scholars, particularly in terms of the Novocherkassk treasure and its relation to earlier Scythian art.²² As Jettmar and others have noted, polychrome metalwork was widespread during the last half of the first millennium B.C., and it is probably wrong to single out the Sarmatians as the sole possessors of such colorful adornment. Yet although polychrome jewelry was made in Achaemenid Persia and in the Greek cities on the Black Sea, it was produced also in Siberia from the late seventh century B.C. on.²³ Sarmatian metalwork may very well have been the offshoot of this Siberian polychrome tradition.

The Aorsi, a tribe of Sarmatians from what is at present central Kazakhstan, moved westward early in the second century B.C. to control the regions of the lower Volga and southern Urals until the middle of the first century A.D.²⁴ According to Strabo, some Aorsi also lived in the northern Caucasus, and "nearly the largest part of the coast of the Caspian Sea was under their power. They were thus enabled to transport on camels the merchandise of India and Babylonia, receiving it from Armenians and Medes. They wore gold also in their dress in consequence of their wealth."²⁵ The Aorsi homeland, their area of expansion, and the lands to which they controlled trade correspond roughly to the provenances of the Peter the Great, Sadovy, and Metropolitan roundels. Strabo's words may very well explain the distribution of the roundels from the Sarmatian-dominated steppes to Iran, where a workshop produced copies of Sarmatian objects for migrant

19. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 59, 63. M. A. Miller, *Don i Priazov'e v drevnosti: chast' II: Drevniaia istoriia* (Munich, 1958) pp. 95–97. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 233–236.

20. S. I. Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia* (Berkeley, 1970) pls. and figs.

21. Barnett, "Art of Bactria," pp. 45–47. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 185, 187. Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kolleksiia*, pp. 18–19, 45, pl. xvi.

22. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 56–64. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 271–282.

23. S. S. Chernikov, *Zagadka zolotogo kurgana* (Moscow, 1965). Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, pp. 207–235.

24. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians*, pp. 116–118.

25. Strabo XI. v. 8.

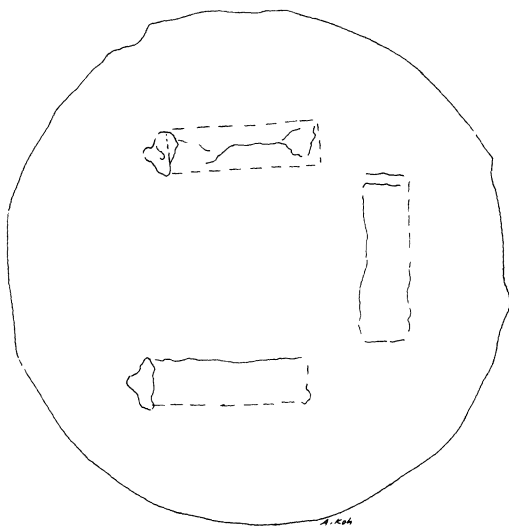


FIGURE 9
Reconstruction of reverse of Metropolitan Museum's roundel

Sarmatians or for nomads like the "Armenians and Medes" who traded with the Sarmatians.

The Azizbeghlou roundel, or rather its mate in a private collection, gives us another clue to the use of the Metropolitan's piece. The Azizbeghlou mate has preserved on its reverse three loops, traces of which can be seen as well on the reverse of the Metropolitan's roundel (Figure 9). The Peter the Great roundels have no backing or reverse loops, although the smaller roundels sometimes have single loops on the rear.²⁶ The Sadovy Kurgan roundels may well have preserved traces of such loops, but the published reports make no mention of any attachments to the metal backing. However, there are a number of phalerae in other styles that do have loops for attachment.

Phalerae, usually of gilded silver, have been found from western Europe to Siberia; there are at least three stylistic groups.²⁷ The westernmost, called Celtic or sometimes Sarmatian, has been found in the Pontic

region, Bulgaria, Rumania, the Netherlands, France, and as far west as the isle of Sark.²⁸ The examples average about 16 cm. in diameter and are decorated with carefully balanced animal scenes, frontal human or divine figures, profile human figures, and geometric designs. They sometimes occur in pairs and sets with smaller phalerae; holes for attachment, or rivets, are often present. Allen has dated a group of these phalerae to the first half of the first century B.C. on the basis of associated Celtic coins, and has suggested a Thracian provenance for some of them. He has also noted that such phalerae were used both as jewelry and as horse trappings.

Another group, which might be called Bosporan, has been discovered in burials and treasure hoards of the regions of the Dnieper, Don, and Kuban Rivers; these are thought to have been produced by Greek workshops in Bosporan cities.²⁹ These too are of gilded silver, with human, animal, or geometric designs, sometimes in pairs and sets of varying sizes, with traces of holes or rivets. Zsetskaia has dated these to the third-first centuries B.C. and has reconstructed one group of ornaments, the Fedulovskii treasure, as a set of horse trappings for bridle and breast strap. The large pair of phalerae in this treasure, some 29 cm. in diameter, has on the reverse three loops for attachment in the same position as those on the Metropolitan's roundel. According to Zsetskaia, the strap across the horse's shoulder passed through the loop at the top of the roundel and met at right angles the strap around the horse's breast; this breast strap passed through the two parallel loops on the roundel. In the opinion of Mary Littauer, this is a plausible arrangement for holding the riding cloth or proto-saddle forward. A small phalera-like plaque is represented as early as the fourth century B.C. on horses on a felt hanging from Kurgan V at Pazyryk (Figure 10).³⁰ Phalerae contemporary with the Metropolitan's roundel can be seen on horses on the Gundestrup cauldron of the second-first centuries

26. Rudenko, *Sibirskaiia kollektsiia*, pl. xxvii, 2, 5, 6.

27. Bunker, "Iron Age Europe," *"Animal Style" Art*, pp. 153-155. E. D. Phillips, *The Royal Hordes: Nomad Peoples of the Steppes* (London, 1965) pp. 102-107. M. Rostovtzeff, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (New York, 1922) pp. 136-139, 232, pl. xxvii. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians*, pp. 140-141.

28. D. F. Allen, "The Sark Hoard of Celtic Coins and Phalerae," *The Numismatic Chronicle* 8 (1968) pp. 37-54. N. Fettich, "Archäologische Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sarmatisch-Daki-

schen Beziehungen," *Acta Archaeologica* 3 (1953) pp. 127-178, pls. xvi-xx. O. Klindt-Jensen, *Gundestrupkedelen* (Copenhagen, 1961) pp. 43-47.

29. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, p. 403. Spitsyn', "Falary," pp. 18-53. I. I. Zsetskaia, "Naznach'e veshchei Fedulovskogo klada," *Arkheologicheskii sbornik* 7 (1965) pp. 28-36.

30. S. I. Rudenko, *Drevneish'e v mire khudozhestvennye kovry i tkani* (Moscow, 1968) pp. 56-68.



FIGURE 10
Detail of felt hanging from Kurgan V, Pazyryk,
Altai Mountains, fourth century B.C. Hermitage



FIGURE 11
Detail of Gundestrup cauldron, second–first cen-
turies B.C. Danish National Museum, Copen-
hagen

B.C., in the Danish National Museum (Figure 11).³¹ Zasetskaia has stressed that the large phalerae are Sarmatian and were not an item of Scythian harnessing; thus they are to be dated no earlier than the third century B.C. Perhaps the adoption of heavy cavalry by the Samartians was responsible for this elaboration in saddling that occurred across the steppes in the third century B.C.³²

A last group of phalerae has been classified by Trever as Graeco-Bactrian. These again are of gilded silver, except for two gold pieces, and again they occur in pairs and sets of various sizes. The largest phalerae range from 24 to 29 cm., and smaller roundels are 12, 15, and 16 cm. in diameter.³³ The motifs include elephants and riders, the griffin coiled on itself (Figure 6), other animals, and geometric designs. Trever dates these phalerae in the second century B.C. Some of them were excavated in the first quarter of the eighteenth century in Siberia, probably somewhere between the Irtysh and Ob' Rivers; others were found near Kuibyshev on the Volga, near Khar'kov, and around Sukhumi on the Black Sea. This group is connected both by motifs and style with phalerae in the Bosporan and Celtic groups, and it is apparent that the three groups are regional variants of one type of object. Trever identifies the Graeco-Bactrian phalerae as horse trappings, and several of the pieces have three loops on the reverse like the Bosporan Fedulovskii roundels.

These gilded silver phalerae of large size, found across the Eurasian steppes and into western Europe, are roughly contemporary with the Metropolitan's roundel and the related pieces of Siberian style.³⁴ The Metropolitan's roundel shares with them the arrangement of three loops on the reverse, and also the tech-

31. Klindt-Jensen, *Gundestrupkedelen*, fig. 36, p. 32; see fig. 37 for another Celtic example. For additional representations of phalerae in art, Trever, *Pamiatniki*, pp. 46–47. For Parthian and Sassanian roundels and phalerae as jewelry and horse trappings, R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties* (New York, 1962) p. 48, fig. 164, p. 126, fig. 165, pp. 127–128, fig. 171, p. 135, fig. 196, pp. 153–154, fig. 205, p. 161; and V. G. Lukonin, *Persia II* (Cleveland, 1967) pl. 29.

32. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians*, p. 31.

33. Barnett, "Art of Bactria," pp. 48–49. Trever, *Pamiatniki*, pp. 35–38, 45–61, pls. 1–11.

34. Phalerae have been found as far east as Noin Ula in Mongolia. S. I. Rudenko, *Die Kultur der Hsiung-Nu und die Hügelgräber von Noin Ula* (Bonn, 1969) pp. 7–10, pl. xxxvi, 3.



FIGURE 12

Iranian roundel, late second to early first millennium B.C. Diameter 8.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 62.115



FIGURE 13

Iranian roundel, late second to early first millennium B.C. Diameter 9.5 cm. Norbert Schimmel Collection

nique of repoussé gilded silver.³⁵ However, the Metropolitan's roundel is more carefully made than the other phalerae with loops on the rear, since these latter are merely unbacked disks through which the loops are attached by rivets. On the Metropolitan's roundel, the loops were fixed to the iron backing and consequently not visible on the front surface. Stylistically, too, the Metropolitan's roundel and the other Siberian-style pieces form a distinct group. The vast distribution of phalerae from Siberia to the English Channel testifies to the spread of horse trappings, which perhaps were introduced along with heavy cavalry and heavier saddling in the third century B.C. However, the Metropolitan's roundel and other Sarmatian phalerae of this type may have been used as much for jewelry as for horse trappings; their somewhat smaller size, the evidence from Zubov's barrow described above, and the weight and value of the cast gold roundels in the Peter the Great treasure suggest as much.

Although the use of phalerae to hold horses' breast straps in place was probably developed on the steppes, roundels themselves may have originated in the Near East. On Assyrian reliefs from the reign of Tiglath

Pileser III (745–727 B.C.) through the reign of Assurbanipal (668–626 B.C.), figures of soldiers are represented wearing a double baldric with central disk on their chests.³⁶ These disks are thought to have originated in Urartu, and some of the troops shown wearing them may have been Urartean auxiliaries in the Assyrian army. Chariot horses on Assyrian reliefs are decorated with pendant disks from the reign of Assurnasirpal II on (883–859 B.C.); in the reigns of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal these disks also appear on the sides of chariots.³⁷

Several roundels in museums and private collections provide good examples of such Near Eastern plaques.³⁸ One piece, in the Metropolitan Museum, is said to

35. For reasons not yet clear, there was evidently a shortage of gold at both the eastern and western extremities of the Eurasian steppes in the last centuries B.C. Barnett, "Art of Bactria," pp. 51–53; *Treasures from Romania* (London, 1971) pp. 43–44.

36. T. A. Madhloom, *The Chronology of Neo-Assyrian Art* (London, 1970) p. 70, pls. XLIX, 3–5; XLVI, 4; XLIX, 6; LI, 2; LV, 7b.

37. Madhloom, *Chronology*, pp. 15, 22, pls. II, 2; VI, 3–4; VII, 1.

38. P. Amandry, "Un motif 'scythe' en Iran et en Grèce," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965) p. 152, note 21, pls. xxvii, 1; xxviii. C. K. Wilkinson, "Art of the Marlik Culture,"

come from the Safid River region of northwest Iran (Figure 12). The roundel is composed of gold and silver foil over bitumen; its diameter is 8.7 cm., and it is decorated with a circle of couchant animals, probably mouflon, around a central rosette. The piece is dated late second–early first millennia B.C. The four metal loops on the bronze backing of the roundel would be appropriate for a double baldric fitting, and it is conceivable that Urartean auxiliaries wore such disks because they were native to areas north and northeast of Assyria. A similar roundel, in the collection of Norbert Schimmel, is also made of bitumen with traces of gold and silver foil; here a frontal human head replaces the central rosette (Figure 13).

These early roundels are related in technique to the Metropolitan and Sadovy Kurgan roundels; in each case, the object is made of gold foil over silver on a metal backing. The decoration, too, is related, in the sense that a row of animals circles a central motif. On the Peter the Great and Sadovy roundels the orientation of the animals is the same as that on the early examples; on the Metropolitan's roundel the animals are reversed, with feet outward. The early roundels may have been worn by Medes, Scythians, and other nomads who were to be found in northwest Iran in the first millennium B.C. That later Iranian-speaking peoples, the Sarmatians, should adopt such objects for their own purposes, seems very appropriate. While it is presently not possible to define the connections between the early Iranian roundels and the later Sarmatian ones, it is likely that a Siberian artistic style evolved from foreign inspiration as well as native Siberian traditions.

Many other influences must have shaped the Sarmatian phalerae in the intervening centuries; coins have been suggested as possible sources for motifs on Bosphoran and Celtic phalerae, and Rudenko has supposed that feltwork inspired polychromy.³⁹ Granted that many hundreds of years separate the early and late roundels, and that the later phalerae were used over

an enormous area by many different peoples, it is amazing that there are any similarities at all. Yet many of the later phalerae are decorated with motifs that occur on the early Iranian roundels—a row of animals, frontal heads, rosettes, geometric decoration. And the various groups of late phalerae have many similarities in motif and composition. A Celtic phalera in the Bibliothèque Nationale has a central circular motif with an outer zone of animals, including griffins (Figure 14), and in a general way the composition is not much different from that of the Metropolitan's roundel. The teardrop-shaped wings on the animals of the Bibliothèque Nationale's phalera may in some sense be related to the colored inlays of the Siberian-style roundels.

The conservatism of preserving a limited repertoire of motifs during long periods of time and over vast distances is characteristic of nomadic art; the Sarmatian phalerae are not unique.⁴⁰ Given this conservatism, it is amazing that local traditions, tastes, and workshops have produced those regional variations

40. Bunker, "The Animal Style," *"Animal Style" Art*, p. 15.

FIGURE 14

Celtic or Thracian phalera of gilded silver, second–first centuries B.C. Diameter 15.5 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris



The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (1965–66) pp. 108–109. There are two other roundels in the Metropolitan Museum not published here, one similar to Figure 12 (Gift of Jerome Eisenberg, 66.31.1) and one of bronze with cloisonné geometric designs filled with glass paste surrounding a central limestone cone, on a bronze backing with two loops, diameter 8.3 cm. (Gift of Elsa Rabenou, 64.63a, b).

39. Allen, "The Sark Hoard," p. 47. Zasedskaia, "Naznachén' veshchei," p. 29. Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs*, pp. 271–272.

that do occur. On the Metropolitan's roundel, an interest in color, form, and decoration predominates; on the Bibliothèque Nationale's phalera, the composition is carefully balanced and the figures are arranged to indicate top and bottom.

It is unfortunate that there is no way of knowing whether or not specific meanings were attached to the designs of these phalerae, and whether or not the meanings were as conservative as the designs themselves. In the instance of the Metropolitan's roundel and associated pieces, deer, feline creatures, and griffins were common in Siberian art of the Scythian Period, and it is reasonable to suppose that these animals continued to have some significance for the Sarmatians. Yet the deer on the Metropolitan's roundel is so summary that it is unlikely to have retained the totemic symbolism of Scythian stags, and the feline creatures and griffins of the outer zone have much less vitality than the animals on the Peter the Great and Sadovy Kurgan pieces.

Aside from their possible meaning, the phalerae may have served as emblems or symbols for particular tribes or groups of people. It is also conceivable that the matched sets of horse trappings were created according to a scheme whereby a particular motif

decorated a particular part of a bridle. Whatever the intrinsic meaning of their decoration, there is ample evidence that phalerae were prized possessions in ancient times. The Germans treasured them, and sets of phalerae were awarded to Roman soldiers to be worn on the breast.⁴¹ Xenophon describes a friendly exchange of gifts between Agesilaus and the son of Pharnabazus whereby Agesilaus gave the boy a phalera from round the neck of Idaeus' horse.⁴² The splendor of the Metropolitan's roundel must reflect the piece's value to its ancient owner, and it is probably no accident that the Siberian-style group of phalerae is markedly decorative. Those Sarmatians who "wore gold . . . in their dress in consequence of their wealth" may have intended to flaunt their fortune; we may interpret the emphasis of decoration above content as the artistic expression of this intention.

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Technical notes, gilded silver roundel, 1970.132

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The roundel is made out of a hammered sheet of silver with gold leaf gilding. The bluish green inlays were set in after the gilding was applied. Although the inlays could not be definitively identified by X-ray diffraction methods, it is assumed that they are made of glass-frit-like material. The present difference in color in the various inlays could be due to chemical deterioration although the possibility of slight initial color differences cannot be excluded. The dark brown material on the back of the roundel was identified as mainly bitumen. It contains fibrous materials, presumably plant fibers. The bitumen is still plastic except on the surface where

it forms a hard crust. The brown crust, however, was identified by X-ray powder refraction as goethite ($\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$). This indicates that an iron backplate was originally placed over the bitumen. This plate is now completely lost, due to corrosion. Its shape was either flat or slightly convex with probably three areas where the iron was cut by two vertical incisions 5-6 cm. long and 1 cm. apart. The strip of metal between the incisions was bent outward to form loops. The impressions of the three bent strips are clearly visible in the bitumen.

41. Allen, "The Sark Hoard," p. 50.

42. Xenophon, *Hellenica* IV. i. 39.