

# THE GOLDEN GRAVE FROM ARZHAN

*Konstantin Chugunov, Anatoli Nagler, and Hermann Parzinger present exclusively the spectacular results of the first Russian-German excavation season in Tuva, South Siberia.*

**S**ince its foundation in 1995 the Department for Eurasian Studies of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin has concentrated its work on the regions around the middle and upper Enisej River in order to investigate the pre- and proto-historic cultural development of South Siberia. One of the main areas of interest of this research is the emergence of Scythian material culture and of the so-called Scythian Animal Style. For a better understanding of this process, our investigations in that region of Eurasia have been based on a broader perspective in a chronological and geographical sense. Together with the Minusinsk Museum (N. Leontev), during the last six years we have been excavating an enormous burial ground containing hundreds of graves dating between the late 4th millennium BC and the 1st century AD. The results are enabling us to develop a new chronological basis for the cultural sequence dating between the Ane-

olithic and the Bronze Ages, and particularly the so-called Tagar culture of the Scythian period, up to the time when Hunnish tribes conquered this region.

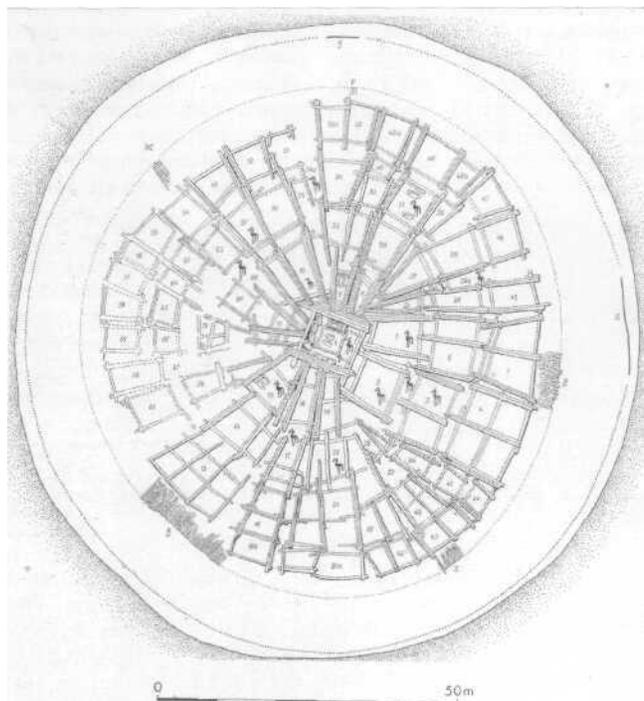
The change from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age (early 1st millennium BC) was particularly interesting, because this was when the early nomadic culture of the Scythians emerged. To the same period belongs another site in the West Siberian forest-steppe which was excavated by another Russian-German co-project: the proto-urban settlement of Chichah. This site is divided into two zones, a citadel and a fortified lower town with more than 100 large houses systematically laid out in lines. Since 1999 the Department for Eurasian Studies of the German Archaeological Institute has been excavating this settlement in annual seasons together with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk (V. Molodin).

One of the crucial questions for Siberian archaeology concerns the emergence of Scythian culture characterised by new forms of technology, a highly specific art style, and its monumental grave constructions reflecting types of social stratification unknown up to that period. Tuva, located on the southern periphery of Siberia near the Mongolian border, is of special interest to these studies. Throughout the ages roads linking the distant regions of Northern China and passing by Mongolia reached first Tuva and then continued northwards to the Minusinsk Basin north of the Western Sayan mountains. These routes of communication had been extremely important for the formation of the Late Bronze Age Karasuk culture in Siberia, which shows strong influences with China's Shang dynasty, as well as for fostering relations between the Tagar culture and the Western Zhou dynasty.

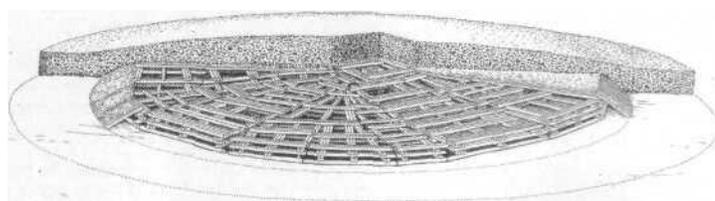
Immediately to the south of the western Sayan mountains a west-east oriented valley extends along the Uyuk River, forming a larger plain near the modern village of Arzhan containing some of the most outstanding kurgans (burial mounds) in Eurasia.

In the 1970s the Russian archaeologist Mikhail Gryaznov investigated a kurgan (so-called kurgan Arzhan 1) at this site, more than 100m in diameter, containing a characteristic wooden construction (Fig 1). The finds from this barrow yielded very early Scythian material for the first time, which helped to define an early Scythian horizon that could be synchronised with the so-called Novoчеркасс culture of the late 9th and early 8th century BC in the north Pontic area. Despite the extraordinary importance of Arzhan, Gryaznov's work was not continued until 1997, when we started a Russian-German joint project.

All the individual kurgans around Arzhan form long parallel chains which cross the plain. Our first joint excavation in 1997 concentrated on one kurgan to the west of Arzhan. This barrow, with a diameter of 28m, was covered with a stone paving and con-



*Fig 1. Plan of the Scythian kurgan Arzhan 1 (after Gryaznov).*



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# Scythian Gold



and forest-steppe belt, which were built using accumulated earth or by laying together sods of turf like mudbrick. As the only investigated stone platform from Arzhan, Gryaznov's Kurgan 1 was dated to the early Scythian horizon; we believed that the other platforms should also belong to this period. Following this year's excavation this hypothesis may have to be changed, but for a definite interpretation of the entire Kurgan 2 we will have to wait until the end of next year's fieldwork. The other visible stone platforms had three huge shafts cut into them, indicating that they must have been almost completely destroyed by grave robbers during the 18th or 19th centuries. The kurgan named Arzhan 2, which we selected for excavation, had just one shaft visible to the south-west, and therefore promised greater archaeological results.



tained a burial chamber built of large larch tree timbers. The grave proved heavily disturbed by tomb robbers, but the remaining grave goods, including small eagle-shaped gold plaques, can be dated to the 5th century BC.

In the following years the joint project agreed to pool its efforts on the large barrow 'Arzhan 2' to the very east of the modern village of Arzhan. We selected this kurgan because it was one of only three remaining stone platforms that was very similar to the one excavated by Gryaznov in the 1970s. In terms of construction methods, these differ considerably from the hundreds of other kurgans at Arzhan and in other parts of the Eurasian steppe

The barrow Arzhan 2 (Fig 2) measured about 80m in diameter and was over 2m high. Work on this kurgan started in 1998 by topographical mapping of the barrow and its surrounding area using geomagnetic prospection, which was undertaken by H. Becker and J. Fassbinder from the Bavarian State Conservation Office in Munich. Results showed that the kurgan was surrounded by three to four concentric rows of stone circles. Some of these were excavated in 2000 (Fig 2). They contained shallow layers of ash and charcoal and some very small fragments of calcinated bones. Some small pieces of bronze and golden plaques were also found, which were not useful for detailed dating, but clearly showed that these stone circles are Scythian.

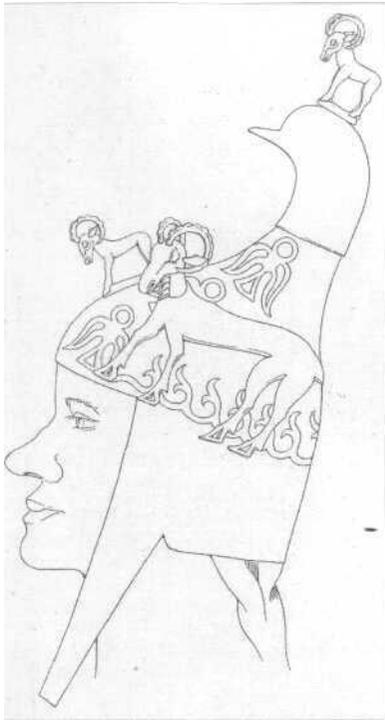


*Fig 2 (top). Kurgan Arzhan 2. In the foreground, stone circles during their excavation in 2000. Note the proximity of another kurgan in the background.*

*Fig 3 (middle). Kurgan Arzhan 2, Grave 5. Gold plaque in the shape of a winged horse, from the headgear of the man.*

*Fig 4 (left). Kurgan Arzhan 2, Grave 5. View of the Scythian burial chamber with the woman on the left and the man on the right.*

# Scythian Gold



*Fig 5. Artistic reconstruction of Scythian headdress with animal decoration. Based on finds from Ukok in the Altai mountains (after Polosmak). The gold plaque in the shape of a winged horse from Arzhan Grave 5 (see Figs 3, 6) originated from a similar piece of clothing.*

Future analysis will verify whether the bone fragments are from animals or human beings, which is of special importance for the interpretation of these stone circles: were they sacrificial areas or cremations?

The excavation of kurgan Arzhan 2 finally started in May 2001 and lasted until the end of July. Three triangular sections were excavated (from the north, north-west, and south) towards the centre of the barrow. This excavation phase was extremely time-consuming because the whole kurgan was built of piled up stone slabs which had to be removed manually.

Soon after the beginning of the excavation we discovered three Turkish graves of 8th-10th century AD date to the north-west. When we reached the original surface under the barrow we detected two more burials, but from the Scythian period (Graves 2 and 5). Grave 2 was a small wooden construction covered with timbers and stone slabs, typical of known characteristics of Scythian graves (but on a smaller scale). It has been interpreted as a symbolic burial, presumably of a horse, because it contained golden horse adornments: wooden remains with golden decoration, possibly from a saddle, and a gold cone with the head of a griffin on top, and gold fishes decorating three sides. A detailed interpretation of these pieces, however, will not be possible before their restoration in the State Hermitage has been completed. But the connection of saddle and fish is already well-known from the so-called 'ice-kurgans' in the Altai mountains; in Pazyryk, as well as Ukok, fish figures cut from felt cloth had been fixed on the saddle-cloth.

About 10m towards the south-west of this grave we discovered the rich burial No. 5 (Fig 4). The dug shaft leading down to it measured 5 x 5m and its contents were completely untouched. At a depth of almost 3m we reached the first wooden cover of the burial chamber made of larch tree timbers. Beneath this we immediately encountered a second wooden timber cover running perpendicular to the upper one. Below this we reached the burial chamber itself (Fig 4), carefully constructed like a blockhouse and stood inside a second, outer burial chamber of the same construction. The four walls presumably would have been adorned with some kind of curtain, because long wooden sticks were found along the walls, which could have been used like curtain rails. The curtains themselves, as well as any other textile remains, were not preserved.

On a carefully made boarded wooden floor were the bodies of two deceased individuals, a man and a woman (Fig 4). Originally the plank floor may have been covered by felt: a thin 2-3cm decomposed layer was found on surface of the floor. The bones were not well preserved. The skulls had dislocated from the bodies because they had probably been placed on a kind of pillow, now decayed.

The male inhumation was buried with a heavy necklace made of pure gold and decorated all over with animal style carvings. Its front part was a little broader and of a square section, with dozens of very small panther figures applied onto it. His outer clothes, probably a kind of kaftan, had been decorated with thousands of small panther figures, each 2-3cm long. These had been attached in vertical rows, also forming motifs such as wings on the back (Fig 7). On his boots, maybe originally of felt or leather, thousands of mini-beads (diameter about 1mm) had been stitched; on the upper part they ended in golden turndowns. Alongside and under the skull were gold plaques with animal-shaped inlays: four winged horses (Figs 3, 6) and one deer originally attached to the headgear. Similar examples from the 'ice-kurgans' in the Altai mountains provide an indication of how the headgear would have looked (Fig 5).

The man's weaponry consisted of an iron dagger, badly preserved, on his right hip. This was connected to the belt by a strap, and both had been decorated with numerous golden Animal Style adornments. Beside the dagger was a miniature gold cup, again decorated in Animal Style. On the left side of the deceased we discovered a gold quiver with fish scale decoration (Fig 8). The wooden arrow shafts were painted in black and red. The poorly

preserved arrow heads had been made of iron, but also showed remains of golden encrustation. The golden adornment on the carrying belt for the quiver was extremely rich. Below the quiver lay the wooden bow itself, again incorporating pieces of golden decoration. Between the quiver and the north-eastern wall of the burial chamber were two picks, one of iron with golden encrustation. To the left of the man's head lay a bronze mirror.

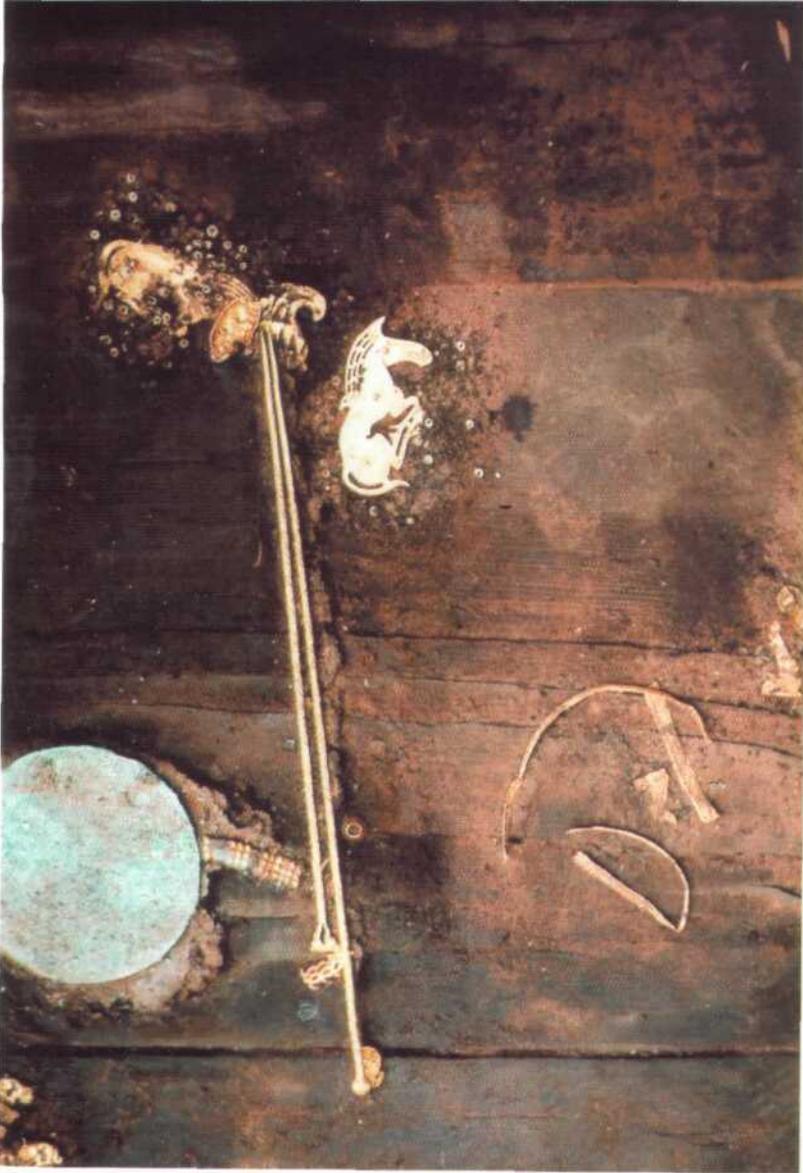
A second bronze mirror was located to the left of the woman's head, was a little bigger than the other and had a gold handle (Fig 6). Below the woman's head were three gold plaques in the shape of animals (two horses and a winged being), associated with the woman's headdress (Figs 3, 6). Beside her head was a pair of gold pins, both masterpieces: their sides were decorated with carvings in Animal Style and with a deer and a winged being on their top (Fig 6). The decoration of the woman's dress corresponded to the man's kaftan: thousands of golden panthers form different motifs, especially wings on the back. On the breast area we found golden earrings and many small beads of gold, amber, garnet, malachite and other precious materials. Around her feet we counted thousands of gold mini-beads, which must have been fixed onto felt or leather boots which had been inlaid with golden ribbons and granulation. At the right hip hung an iron knife, badly preserved but with numerous excellent gold belt adornments in Animal Style decoration.

In the western corner of the burial chamber were three large amber beads, a wooden cup with a golden handle, a gold comb with wooden teeth, and a heap of various seeds (wild pistachios and maybe also poppy). Although the seeds are awaiting analysis, the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote about the Scythians in the North Pontic area, reported that they burnt poppy and other seeds and inhaled the smoke to hallucinate. Within the heap of seeds was a gold pectoral in Animal Style decoration and a small bronze cup, still inside a small leather bag.

This short overview about the most important finds from the rich grave from Arzhan 2 is far from complete. Many aspects will become clearer following restoration and detailed study. This comment also applies to the burial's chronology. There are Archaic elements present, dating back to the 6th and 5th centuries BC, but other objects may prove slightly more recent (4th century BC). The dendrochronological investigations of the wooden timbers, to be conducted in Berlin and Novosibirsk, will be extremely important.

The State Hermitage in St Petersburg now houses more than 9300 gold

# Scythian Gold



*fig 6 (left). Kurgan Arzhan 2, Grave 5. The gold pins and the gold animal plaques from the woman's headdress, with the woman's bronze mirror with the gold handle alongside.*

*Fig 7 (above). Kurgan Arzhan 2, Grave 5. Gold panthers on the back of the man's kaftan.*

*Fig 8 (below). Kurgan Arzhan 2, Grave 5. Gold quiver with gold fish scale adornment from the carrying belt.*



objects (not including the uncountable golden beads) from Grave 5 of Arzhan 2. We thank its General Director, Professor Miakhail B. Piotrovsky, for taking on the objects' restoration. This burial is now not only the richest known from Siberia, but also one of the richest of this period in Eurasia. Its discovery was a case of great luck for Eurasian archaeology. In 2002 the Russian-German team, under Konstantin Chugunov from the State Hermitage and Hermann Parzinger and Anatoli Nagler from the German Archaeological Institute, will continue and complete the investigation of the kurgan Arzhan 2. Immediately after that an international and inter-disciplinary team of scientists and experts from different fields (under the direction of the excavators Chugunov, Parzinger, and Nagler) will prepare the results for publication in a bi-lingual Russian and German monograph to be edited by the Russian Academy of Sciences and the German Archaeological Institute. An exhibition of these finds is planned for 2004 in Berlin.