CHAPTER II
SCYTHIA – ITS GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION, SCYHTIA AND ŚAKA TERRITORIES THEIR CONNOTATIONS
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AND
SCYTHIA AND ŚAKA TERRITORIES—THEIR CONNOTATIONS

This chapter basically deals with the geographical connotations of Scythia and the Šaka territory, as revealed from archaeological and literary sources. Before dealing with the geographical connotations, we would like to mention a couple of points regarding the theory of nomadism. Such theorizations have often helped archaeologists in studying the nomadic cultures of different regions (widely spaced and belonging to different time spans). Primarily, nomadisation occurs in response to environmental and political insecurity (the two are frequently related) through the exercise of options inherent in an unstable subsistence strategy based on pastoral accumulation. It has been argued, by social anthropologists and historians, that nomadism is a consequence of the specialization and integration of pastoralism and cultivation, which was only possible with the development of complex urban societies.¹ On the other hand scholars² have pushed the search

for nomadic origins far back into the neolithic.\footnote{Roger Cribb, \textit{Nomads in Archaeology}, Cambridge, 1993, p.10.} A thorough study of the objects of Scythian culture found from Ukraine (North Black Sea region), North Caucasus and Siberia shows that they were closely related in style and form. These objects date from the sixth century B.C. onwards. At the same time they are again similar to the artifacts from Siberia and Altai dated in the ninth century B.C. onwards. It was firstly Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) who devoted a large part of his \textit{Historiae} to a description of the lands of the Scythians and to their traditions and from him we come to know that the land of the Scythians was confined to the flat lands north of the Black Sea, the Thracian coastlands and adjoining Asia Minor. Speaking of Asia Minor, we would like to mention that the nomadic presence in West Asia was also noted in Assyrian chronicles. As early as the seventh century B.C. the nomads were known in Assyrian sources\footnote{Hist. Civ. Cen. As., Vol.II, p.23.} as the Ashguzāi. Known to the Assyrians as Ashguzāi, Asguzāi, or Ishkuzāi (=Scuthai), the Scythians are first mentioned by the Assyrians in 676-652 B.C., in a fragmentary series of questions put to the oracle of the god Shamash by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon.\footnote{Gol. De. Eur., p.42.} The Scythians appeared near the north-eastern border of Assyria about this time and, because of their great fighting ability, tactics, and flexibility in battle, were soon able to occupy a leading position in the political and military hierarchy of the near East. The Scythians presumably had left Assyria and settled in the northern Caucasus.
region. Northern Caucasus was near Assyria. It is noteworthy that the famous kurgans of Kelermes and Ulski (dated in the mid-seventh century B.C.) were situated in northern Caucasus. The Scythian presence in the north Black Sea region is also well reflected in stone inscriptions, coins, and in the writings of many observers following Herodotus. Many Greek writers referred to all the nomads of Eurasia, including those of Central Asia, as Scythians. Although the Scythians were not the only non-Greeks in this large region, it came to be known as Scythia.

However, the name Scythia was probably also extended to some eastern areas including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, i.e., a major portion of Central Asia. By Central Asia we mean the present territories of Afghanistan, North-Eastern Iran, Pakistan, Northern India, Western China, Mongolia and the former Soviet Central Asian Republics. It is significant that much of the North-Western Himalayas belong to the steppes of Central Asia. Archaeologists have grouped together the steppe-desert zones of Central Asia, Sinkiang, Mongolia and South-Western Siberia as one, on the basis of vegetation and topography. The Śaka territory needs some mention here. The Persians designated all the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes, including the Scythians, as the Śakas. We already know that the Achaemenid empire had established the Syr Darya as its northern frontier
against the nomadic Sakas. It might be mentioned here that Central Asia during the first half of the first millennium B.C. had experienced the changes that followed the introduction of iron. The process of learning to produce iron was facilitated by the previous experience of working in bronze. The predecessors of the Scythians (the inhabitants of Arzhan in the eighth century and the people of the Tagar culture) had developed a sophisticated bronze metallurgy. Early Scythian archaeology indicates that this mastery was inherited by the Scythians along with the common object typology and iconography. Herein the new technology of iron was assimilated slowly and the obvious advantages of the new metal were not immediately recognized (as revealed by archaeology). This transitional phase, in which Central Asia advanced from its primeval condition to the formation of classes and early states on the basis of agricultural and pastoral economy, is reflected in the oldest texts of the Avesta.¹ The lands of the Avesta most probably correspond to the ethno-geological connotations of its name – the Aryan territory. Its socio-cultural character includes the entire Aral and Syr Darya belt, stretching from Chorasmia (the Chorasmians are incidentally mentioned by Herodotus and Hecataeus of Miletus) to Ferghana in the east. Between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C., Chorasmia and Ferghana witnessed rapid urbanization and at the height of its power under Darius I, the Achaemenid empire included

¹ Ibid., p.20.
Chorasmia, the Šakā Tigraxaudā, Sogdians and the "Šakas who are beyond Sogdiana". The first three are recorded in the list of countries subordinate to the next Persian king, Xerxes (486/465 B.C.), in the inscriptions and reliefs at Persepolis, Susa and Naqsh-i-Rustam. As a result, a significant proportion of the sedentary zone of northern Central Asia was included in the Achaemenid empire at the height of its prosperity. Only Ferghana lay beyond its borders as mentioned earlier. Chorasmia with Sogdiana and others made up the sixteenth satrapy, while the satrapy of the Šakas paid two hundred and fifty silver talents to the Persians. Thus they played a considerable role in the economy and politics of the Achaemenid empire. Sources record the Šaka presence in Nippur and other Babylonian cities. A Šaka detachment fought in Darius's army at the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.) and in other engagements. Incidentally, terracotta figurines of Šaka warriors in pointed caps have been found in excavations at various places in the Achaemenid empire, ranging from Egypt to Central Asia.\(^1\) By the second half of the fourth century B.C., the Šakas had become independent in the valleys of oases of northern Central Asia, as revealed by stable strata details. A Šaka community arose between the lower Amu Darya and the Syr Darya and in the hill country of the upper Syr Darya. Valuable evidence for its anthropological and ethnic characters come from the

Bisutun, Persepolis and the Naksh-i-Rustam reliefs. To judge from these, the Central Asian peoples and tribes were virtually indistinguishable in clothing, head-gear and armaments. Their dress was much the same, consisting of short tunics, a broad belt and narrow trousers, only the Śaka Tigraxaudā were set apart by their sharp-pointed caps.1

We come back to Herodotus. According to him, the Sakai (i.e. the Śakas) were in truth the Amurgioi Skutha (i.e. the Amyrgian Scythians).2 Strabo indicates that the Sakai and several other peoples were known by the general name Skuthai (i.e. the Scythians).3 Arrian refers to the Sakai (i.e. the Śakas), “a Skuthon” (i.e. Scythian people) “of the Skuthai” (i.e. the Scythians) “who inhabit Asia”.4 Ptolemy describes not only Skuthia (i.e. Scythia) “within the Imaos”5 and “beyond the Imaos”6 but also speaks of the “Land of the Sakai” (i.e. the Śakas).7 It appears that to these classical authors the Śakas were Scythians, but not all Scythians were Śakas. The Sakai or the Sakas of the classical sources have been universally identified with the people called by the

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1 Ibid., p.44.
2 Hist., VII. 64.
3 Geographikon, VI. 8, 2.
4 Anabaseos Alexandrou, III. 8, 3.; cf. also Historarium Alexandri Magni Macedonis, VII. 8 and VIII. 4.
5 Geog. Hup., VI. 12, 1f.
6 Ibid., VI. 15, 1f.
7 Ibid., V. 13, 1f.
name Saka (also spelt Šaka) in Indian sources. It is apparent, therefore, that the Scythians were not wholly identical with the Šakas of Indian sources. It should, however, be noted here that there was a tendency in different quarters from an early period to identify the Scythians with the Sakas (>Šakas). Herodotus observed that the Persians used to call all Skuthai (or Scythians) by the name Saka.¹ Pliny stated that to some tribes of the Scythaë (i.e. the Scythians) “the Persians have given the general name of the Sacae” (=Sakas), “from the tribe nearest to them”.²

This probably explains why the Scythians at all began to be known as Sakas (=Šakas). Originally and fundamentally the names Saka or Saca (=Šaka) and Skutha or Scytha did not have one and the same connotation. The question of the distribution of the Šaka tribes is extremely complex. Literary evidence presents the most varied and contradictory points of view. The location of the different tribes are mainly determined from the extant archaeological data. The archaeological data is mainly complemented by the Nakshi-i-Rustam inscription of Darius I (522–480 B.C.) which lists the following three Šaka tribal confederations. a) The Šakā Haumavargā, in Ferghana, where we have seen that the Sakas had begun to change over to a

¹ *Hist.,* VII. 64.
² *Nat. Hist.,* VI. 19, 50.
settled form of life; b) The Śakā Tigrakhauda, in the region beyond the Syr Darya and in Semirechye; and c) The Śakā tayaiy paradraya, or European Sakas (Scythians). In his list of Darius' satrapies, Herodotus also mentions the Caspians and the Sacae as belonging to the fifteenth province. As suggested by Oswald Szemerényi, the Greek term Skythai reflects an earlier Iranian Skuta i.e. an archer.

The Scythians were culturally related to the Sauromatians in the Volgo-Ural region. Herodotus incidentally writes of the Sauromatians as pastoral nomads living on the steppes to the east of the Scythians. Recent excavations (concluded in 1990) in the Volgo-Ural region have revealed the marvellous finds from the twenty-five barrows at Filippovka. These finds have been dated by K.F. Smirnov to the late fifth and early fourth century B.C. According to Herodotus, the Sauromatians arose from the union of Scythians and Amazons. The Scythians are often related with the Sarmatians who probably arose from a union of nomadic invaders from the east and Sauromatians. The Scythians were also related to the Massagetae in the region east of the Caspian Sea.

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Herodotus\textsuperscript{1} describes the Pontic Scythian tribes partly as sedentary agriculturalists but he says\textsuperscript{2} that the Massagetae of Central Asia "sow no grain but live by keeping herds and fishing...they also drink milk". Investigation of the large fortified settlement of Chirik-Rabat, on the north-western confines of the Kyzyl Kum desert, a settlement connected with the Massagetae, certainly contradicts the statement that they led a purely nomadic life and show that in their economy the ancient traditions of fishing were combined with tillage of the land and semi-nomadic stock-raising.\textsuperscript{3} A whole range of Scythian-type cultures have been associated with Šaka sites in Central Asia on the Syr Darya, in the Pamirs, and in Semirechye (east of Lake Balkash). We have associated the Scythian culture with some particular people as mentioned in the sources but the Tasmol culture in Central Kazakhstan, the Pazyryk culture in the Altai, the Tagar culture\textsuperscript{4} in Southern Siberia and the stock-breeding cultures of Mongolia cannot be assigned to any particular people (mentioned in literary sources). However the latter constitute the Scytho-Siberian tradition, the main predecessor of the Šaka/Scythian art forms. Thus the geographical area of southern Siberia and adjoining lands constitute possible extensions during the time of the early Šakas.

\textsuperscript{1}Hist., IV. 17-18.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., I. 216.
\textsuperscript{4}Art. Scy., p.30.
The classical sources knew about the conquest of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom by nomadic tribes around 130 B.C. These nomadic tribes were referred to as peoples who came from beyond the Jaxartes (now the Syr Darya). Strabo mentions four tribes: the Asioi, the Pasianoi, the Tokharoi and the Sakarauloi. Pompeius Trogus notes briefly that the Asiani, kings of the Tochari laid waste the Sacaraucae. The Šakas were driven out from the Greco-Bactrian kingdom by the Yūeh-chih (as mentioned in Shih-chi of Szu-ma Ch'ien, the Han-shu, the Hou Han-shu and the Pei-shih). Thereafter the Šakas established a series of kingdoms in eastern Iran and north-western India as known from archaeological data, Graeco-Roman literary works and occasional references in Sanskrit texts. In the first century A.D. along with the Parthians or Pahlavas they ruled a territory stretching from the Seistan to the north-western India.

It is interesting to note that Herodotus's references to the Scythians and modern archaeological finds suggest trade in gold from Siberia and silk from China through the routes in Central Asia. When the Greeks began to rule in Bactria it was already a potential trading zone. It was at the meeting point of various trade routes and these routes were important in long distance trade in

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1 Gegeographikon, XI. 8, 2.
2 Prologus XLI of the Historiae Philippicae.
which India was also a participant. Among the suggested sources of the supply of gold to Bactria, ancient Scythia (which included parts of the southern section of the former U.S.S.R.) may be included. Along with ancient Scythia the Ural and Altai regions may also be included.¹ On the other hand the Chinese treatises of the first century B.C. and early centuries of the Christian era refer to China's communications with the Western countries. From the report of Chang Ch’ien as quoted in the Shiḥ-Chi² (completed in c. 100 B.C.), it appears that it was possible to travel from the mainland of China (Eastern China) to the area on the Kuei river (Oxus) through a route passing over the northern section of the Taklamakan desert in Sin-Kiang.³ It appears from certain Greek texts of the fourth and third centuries B.C. (as quoted in later writings) that a route from West Asia passed through Aria (the area of Herat in north-western Afghanistan including Kandahar) to Hortospanum (Kabul). From there it passed through Peucolatis (Charsada in the Peshawar District), Taxila (near Rawalpindi), and finally reached Palibothra.⁴ Bactra (Balkh), the capital of Bactria (to the north-west of the Hindu Kush and south of the Oxus) must have been connected with Aria (Herat area) and Margiana (Merv area in Turkmenistan) on the west, Sogdiana (to the north of the Oxus) on the north, and Kubhā (Kabul), Kapisā (Begram) and Lampaka (Lamghan) in the south-

² H.H.S., Ssu-pupei-yao edition, Ch. 118.
⁴ Nat. Hist., VI. 21, 61-64.
west and then beyond the Hindu Kush. This West Asian route was probably referred to as Krpty (Kārāpathi) in two edicts\(^1\) of Aśoka (c.272-236 B.C.). The *Statthmoi Parthikoi*.\(^2\) of about the end of the first century B.C. suggests the continuation of the use of the route from Aria and through Zarangiana (Seistan) to Arachosia (Kandahar region). Eratosthenes (c. 275-194 B.C.) also mentions the Royal Road.\(^3\)

In Central Asia the Šakas still ruled in pockets. Between the third and the eighth centuries of the Christian Era, the oldest local ethnic group in Chach, Ilak (eastern bank of Syr Darya) and Ferghana consisted of Šaka tribes from beyond the Syr Darya.\(^4\) They probably spoke Iranian (Saka dialect) as recorded in medieval Arabic and Persian literature and corroborated by numismatic sources. Saka documents dating from the seventh to the tenth century A.D. have been found in Khotan and Tumshuq, both oases around the Tarim Basin.\(^5\) Oases around the Tarim Basin include Kashgar, Yarkand, Karghalik, Khotan, Kerya, Niya, Aksu and Kucha. These documents, written in Brāhmī script, represent several dialects. It is interesting to note that at an early date, people known to the Chinese as the Sai (derived from archaic

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3 *Geographikon*, XV. 1,77; cf. also *Indike*, III. 1-5.
5 Ibid., p. 283.
Chinese 'sak') sought a home in the west and south of the Tarim. Patient studies of the geographic, literary and epigraphic evidence have identified the Sai with the Sakā known to the Achaemenid Persians, Greek geographers and historians, and with the Śakas in Indian texts. The Śakas must have come to Khotan long before the second century B.C. According to the *Han-shu*, the Sai tribes split and formed several states. The people of Tashkurgan in the Pamirs may perhaps been a branch of the Śakas since they could have spoken a language close to the Khotanese. Excavations have revealed Śaka cemeteries in this region. As late as the eleventh century the people of the Kashgar area spoke a dialect that can be classified as the Śaka language.¹

Since this work deals with the Śaka/Scythian elements in early Indian art (from first century B.C. to second century A.D.) the Śakas of this time span will be involved, but there is enough evidence to encourage further investigations and to point to archaeology (as there is paucity of written sources) as the principal medium of enquiry.