



Summary :

The Sarmatians were Iranian-speaking nomads mentioned by ancient written sources in the North Pontic area from the 2nd c. BC. They were involved in military conflicts at the edges of the Roman Empire, in the Bosporan Kingdom and the Caucasus. In epigraphic sources the name of the Sarmatians is less known. According to the traditional point of view, their material culture has its roots in the Volga-Ural region from where these tribes moved to the North Pontic steppes. However, until now there are no convincing parallels between the material cultures of the mentioned regions. Thus, the archaeological evidence of the Sarmatians is still in question.

Date

2nd c. BC. onwards

Geographical Location

North Pontic area

1. Sarmatians as historical people

The Sarmatians were known as 'Sarmatae' by Roman authors. Greek writers mention them as 'Σαρμάται', 'Σαυρομάται' and 'Συρμάται', which were usually regarded as synonymous. However, some sources mention them as different peoples.¹

[Herodotus](#) locates the Sauromatians east of the river Tanais (modern Don).² According to Diodorus, they came from Media and settled themselves along the Tanais, i.e. in the area near the Maiotis Lake (modern Sea of Azov). Eventually, this tribe expanded and conquered Scythia.³

The Sarmatians were known to Europe since the 2nd c. BC. Thus, Polybius mentions as an ally to the King of Pontus [Pharnaces](#) a European prince, Gatalus the Sarmatian.⁴ The appearance of new ethnic names on the map of the Northern Black Sea area is often explained as the result of the movement of some Asian tribes from the northern boundaries of Graeco-Bactria, who are frequently regarded as Sarmatians. Thus, [Strabo](#) mentions the Roxolani and the Iazygs as the most important people who lived in the steppes between [Tanais](#) and [Borysthenes](#) (modern Dnepr).⁵ He also cited several times the tribes of Syrakoi and Aorsi.⁶

At the same time, the Sarmatians are scarcely cited in epigraphic sources. The only document possibly mentioning the name "Sarmatians" could be a Chersonesian decree, which describes an attack of the [Scythians](#) and "Sa..." on the Greek city of [Kalos Limen](#) (IOSPE I², 353). There is one more inscription (IOSPE I², 343) mentioning the barbarians living near [Chersonesus](#) and threatening the city. Vinogradov suggested that they were Sarmatians,⁷ but the details of this reconstruction are not clear.⁸

On the contrary, in epigraphic sources from the North Pontic area there are many other ethnic names mentioned such as Scythians, Maiotians, [Thracians](#), etc. The Decree in honour of Protogenos (IOSPE I², 32), dated to the 3rd c. BC, describes the difficult state of Olbia when attacked by the Skyroi and the Galatoi, who are rightly correlated with Celts. Some ethnic names of the Decree are sometimes identified with the Sarmatians (Saioi, Saudaratai) but without



reasonable argumentation.

In the second half of the 2nd century BC, Olbia was under the protectorate of the Scythian king [Scillouros](#) who struck his name on Olbian [coins](#).⁹ An inscription from the [Scythian Neapolis](#) (modern Simferopol, Crimea)¹⁰ mentions victories of the king of the Scythia Argotus, a predecessor of Scillouros and husband of the Bosporan Queen Kamasaria, against Thracians and Maiotians. The inscription is dated not later than 130 BC. The Decree in honour of [Diophantos](#), (IOSPE I², 352), dated to the end of the 2nd c. BC, mentions the Scythians, Reuxinaloi and Tauroi.

The name of Sarmatians becomes more popular in works of Roman writers from the middle of the 1st c. BC. The Sarmatia and Scythia Taurica were placed by the Roman general Agrippa as the 9th region of the Roman Empire.¹¹ The Sarmatians living on the boundaries of the Roman Empire for a long time were harassing the populations of the provinces.¹² From the first centuries AD onwards, the most known Sarmatian tribe become the Alans, whose way of life and customs were minutely described by Ammianus Marcellinus.

The Sarmatians were warlike nomads. Many authors mentioned the important role of women in the society of Sauromatians, Maiotians and Sarmatians.¹³

The language of the Sarmatians belonged to the north-Iranian branch and was a dialect to the language of the Scythians.

2. The archaeological evidence for the Sarmatians

The scholar, who for the first time clearly shaped the concept about a Sarmatian invasion to Scythia, was M.I. Rostovtzeff. Written sources of the later period of Sarmatian history gave him a stable historical portrait of the Sarmatians, which featured specific artefacts, such as a special type of weapon and arms, imported objects from the East (i.e. Iranian, Parthian), polychromy in their jewellery and 'animal style' objects.

To correspond with this image of the Sarmatians, Rostovtzeff was looking for material evidence, which would be situated east of Scythia, dated from the end of the 4th to the beginning of the 3rd c. BC, and exhibiting the above-mentioned features. Such material monuments became the Prokhorovka kurgans (the Orenburg group). In Kurgan 1, the following objects were discovered: an iron armour, a long sword, polychrome jewels, items of Animal Style and Achaemenid bowls (i.e. direct Iranian imports), which made Rostovtzeff to suggest that these monuments were belonging to Sarmatians – the Iranian newcomers from the East. But by those Sarmatians he did not mean the local population. Rostovtzeff imagined the Sarmatians, as well as the Scythians, as a group of tribes of Iranian origin, who were a minority of the population and ruled the majority of the local people. They were mounted warriors, who came to the south Russian steppes from the East. According to him, the whole steppe east of the Don was in the hands of these newcomers, even in the 4th century BC.

Rostovtzeff has developed his theory about the Sarmatian culture before 1917. He later, however, changed it in details. He created a clear historical idea of the Sarmatian culture, he pointed out the main historical stages of it and connected the historical name of "Sarmatians" with the particular material culture.

In the 1920's-1930's the idea of Rostovtzeff concerning the Sarmatian material culture of the Volga-Ural region was



adopted by the Moscow–Saratov school of archaeologists (B. Grakov, P. Rykov, P. Rau, K. Smirnov). According to their point of view, however, the Sarmatians were not Iranian newcomers from the East but the local population of the steppes between the Volga and Ural rivers. Namely from this land, the Sarmatians went to the West to conquer Scythia. For many years there were attempts to prove this conquest on the base of the archaeological evidence. But until now the archaeological cultures of the Northern Black Sea region, on the one hand, and the Volga-Ural region on the other, demonstrate great differences in burial rites as well as in the types of objects. Thus, for the time being, the archaeological evidence does not offer a clear picture concerning the Sarmatians and it needs to be developed further.

1. Scyl. 68, 70; Ps.-Scymn. 876-881; Plin. VI .6, VI .19.
2. Hdt. IV, 21.
3. Diod. Sic., *Hist. II*. 43.6-7.
4. Plb., *Hist. XXV*.2.12-13
5. Str., *Geogr.* VII. 3.17.
6. Str., *Geogr.* XI.2.1; XI.5.8.
7. Виноградов, Ю.Г., Херсонесский декрет «о несении Диониса» IOSPE P 343 и вторжение сарматов в Скифию, *ВДИ* 3 (1997) p. 104-124.
8. Храпунов, И.Н., *Этническая история Крыма в раннем железном веке* (Симферополь, Керчь 2004). С. 85.
9. Фролова, Н.А., Монеты скифского царя Скилура, *СА* 1 (1964) p. 44.
10. Zaytsev, Yu.P., *The Scythian Neapolis (2nd century BC to 3rd century AD). Investigation into the Graeco-Barbarian city on the northern Black Sea coast* (BAR International Series 1219 Oxford 2004) p. 111-112, fig. 56-57.
11. Rostowzew, M., *Skythien und der Bosphorus* (Berlin 1931), p. 42.
12. Plin. IV. 80-81.
13. Hdt. IV.116; Hp., *Aer.* 24; Diod. II.44; Mela I.115.

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