

# The Meeting with the Scythians Idiophones and Chordophones

## The Ancient Altai and Black Sea Region's Cultures

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**Abstract**—The study of Ancient Scythians' music is one of the most interesting subjects of the modern music archaeology. It can be researched in the comparative way. According to the texts by ancient Greek authors, the ancient Scythians did not have musical instruments. Yet, between the 18th–20th centuries, new archaeological artifacts proved that ancient Scythians could use idiophones and chordophones. A number the Scythian idiophones (horse bells) were found as well as the aerophones (ancient bone pipes) with different subjects of the household in the 18th–19th centuries. At the end of 1940s, the famous “Scythian harp” was founded in one of five large and nine small graves on the Bolshoy Vlagan River Valley in Altai region. During that, time it was Soviet Union territory belonging to both Russian and Kazakh Republics cultural areas. The studies of the Pazyryk harp and its origin were pursued both Russian and foreign researchers. Today the Scythian chordophones and idiophones as two main groups of the archaeological artifacts and musical instruments are known in Russian music archaeology.

**Keywords**—Scythian culture; Scythian harp; Scythian lyre; harp; lyre; chordophones; horse bronze bells; idiophones

### I. INTRODUCTION

Scythians... a force and a stronghold of the past... the pain and hope of a modern culture...

The Scythian history (7th century BC – 3rd century AD on the territories of Russia) had Assyrian origin and was connected with ancient Eurasian cultures. The territory of the ancient Scythia covered many thousands of kilometers from the Far East and Siberia in Asia to the Black Sea regions in Europe.

Modern studies of the Scythian history and culture demonstrate the more detailed information about different ethnic groups that were the population of the Eurasian Steppe during this period “Fig. 1”. On the territory of the Russia Scythian culture was distributed in Siberia, the Urals, the Volga region, the Caucasus, the Black Sea region and in the Crimea.



Fig. 1. Scythians and the neighboring countries and peoples on the map

The research of Scythian culture in Russian history had begun in the 17th century with a piece of work known as “The Scythian history” by Andrey Lyzlov (1655-1697). At the beginning of the 18th century, the first excavations of the Scythian settlements in Siberia were made where famous metal (golden, silver) jewelry and artifacts in the Scythian-Siberian animal style were found (now it is so-called “Siberian Collection” of Peter I in The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) “Fig. 2”.

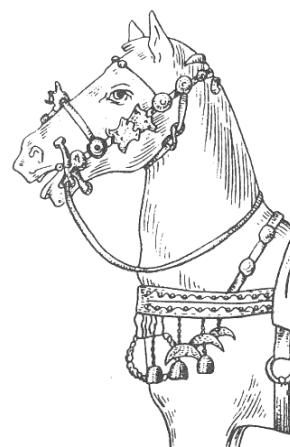


Fig. 2. The Scythian horse bronze bells. Siberian – Ural region. (See: Martynov A. The Scythian horse bronze bells. Archeology. Moscow, 2005. — 447 p.: ill.).

At the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries, the next stage of the interest to the Scythian history, culture and arts appeared in Russia. It can be explained with new artistic views. The image of the Scythian man became the symbol of the great force. Outstanding Russian and Soviet composer Sergei Prokofiev expressed this idea in his “Scythian suite” (music of the ballet “Ala and Lolly”) in 1915. One of the famous Russian poets representing the Silver Age of Russian Poetry Alexander Blok wrote in 1918 year about the Russians: “We are the Scythians... We are the Asians...”

For a long time nothing was known about the music and musical instruments in Scythian culture.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the capital of the last Scythian Kingdom in Crimea (2nd century BC – 2nd century AD, now it is near Simferopol city, Crimea) was discovered and named Neapolis Scythian. In the 1950s, researchers could see and study the fresco image of the Scythian man with a lyre from the Necropolis crypt No. 9 in Neapolis Scythian. But it was the second great musical artifacts in Scythian archeology.

But the main artifact became the ancient Scythian harp (5th century BC) with two strings which was found in the II Pazyryk burial in Altai during expeditions work headed Sergey Rudenko in 1948.

Some archaeological artifacts from different excavations in Eurasia in 20th century testify the ancient Scythians had the aerophones (bone flutes) or could use as idiophones (horse bells).

Since this period, ancient Scythian music and musical instruments studies represent the most interesting problems of the modern music archaeology. They can be researched in a comparative way.

## II. ABOUT THE SCYTHIAN IDIOPHONES

According to the texts by Herodotus, Plutarch, Aristotle and other ancient Greek authors, the ancient Scythians did not have musical instruments. They were strong warriors, brave horsemen and hunters. Their leaders and chiefs were buried with their own warriors and servants who were the horsemen too.

Their main sound instruments were horse bronze bells which could be used as idiophones (they signaled the whereabouts of horses and protects them from wild animals and evil spirits).

Today in Russian museums are presented five main kinds of the Scythian horse bronze bells from Siberia, Ural, Black Sea regions and Crimea (Neapolis Scythian):

- the bronze bells with square-shaped base and supports “Fig. 3”, “Fig. 4”, “Fig. 5”, “Fig. 6”;



Fig. 3. The bronze bells with square-shaped base and supports from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photos by the authors of the article.



Fig. 4. The bronze bells with square-shaped base and supports from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photos by the authors of the article.



Fig. 5. The bronze bell with square-shaped base and supports from the Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 6. The bronze bells with square-shaped base from the Luristan, area to the west of modern Iran (6), 1 millennium BC. - 2nd century BC, Collection IEAC Midi-Pyrenees, France.

- the domed bronze bells “Fig. 7”;
- the bronze bells from Babylon “Fig. 8”;
- the bronze bells with square-shaped base “Fig. 9”;
- the bronze bell from Siberia “Fig. 10”;

- the bronze bells with holes or slits “Fig. 11”, “Fig. 12”;
- the bronze bells with holes and slits from Siberia “Fig. 13”;



Fig. 7. The domed bronze bells from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article



Fig. 8. The bronze bells from Babylon, IX-VIII centuries BC. (See: Beh N.I., Vasiliev V.A., Gini Ch.E., Petrychenko A.M. World art casting. Technology History - Editorial URSS, metallurgy, 1997. 272 p.)



Fig. 9. The bronze bell from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 10. The bronze bell from Siberia (Cheremukhova Padh, Ivolginsky complex in Zabaikalie).



Fig. 11. The bronze bells with holes from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photos by the authors of the article.



Fig. 12. The Scythian slotted bell decorated with a horse, Romania. Bells Museum in Apolda, Germany. Photo by S. Narozhnaya.

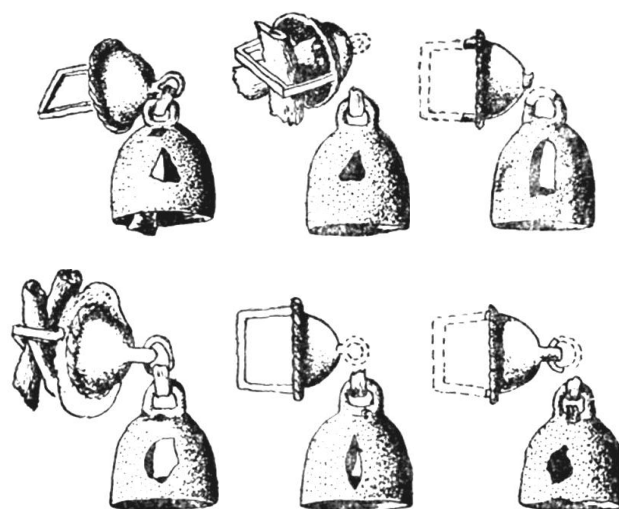


Fig. 13. The bronze bells with holes and slits from Siberia (Derestuysky kultuk, Ivolginsky complex in Zabaikalie). (See: Davydova A.V. Ivolginsky complex (settlement and burial ground) is the Xiongnu monument in Zabaikalie. // L.: Leningrad State University, 1985. 111 p.).

- the round bronze bells “Fig. 14”.

They have conformity with the same bells of the Bronze Age in other regions (Babylon, Iran, China). Different kinds of the horse bronze bells demonstrate the significance of the cultural contacts and influences for the Scythian culture in Eurasian Steppe and Crimea region.



Fig. 14. The round bronze bell from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.

Scythian girls and women wore bronze bells and discs on the chest not for the beauty (as the jewelry) but with the signal functions and for the protection against evil spirits especially “Fig. 15”, “Fig. 16”, “Fig. 17”.

The pendants or/and coins are used with the same aims on the traditional female costumes among modern peoples of the Volga region (Tatar, Udmurt, Chuvash, Mordva, Komi, Mari ethnic groups).

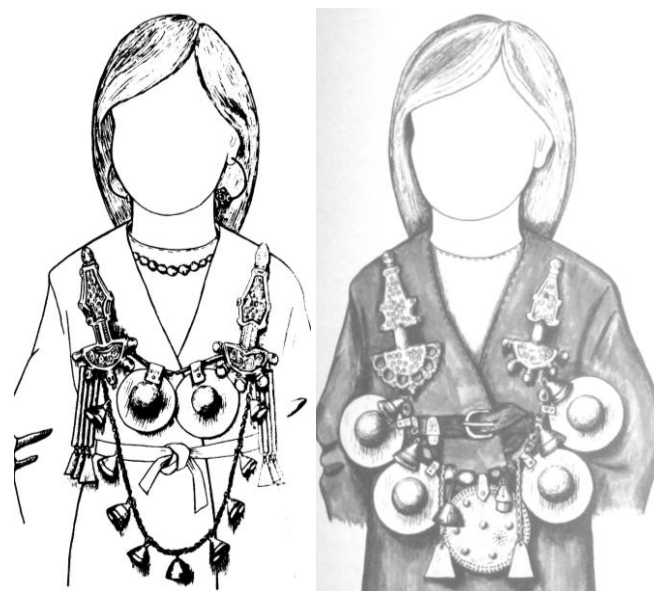


Fig. 15. The girls dress with jewelry, bronze discs and bells from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian) (See: Unbekannte Krim: Archäologische Schätze aus drei Jahrtausenden Gebundene Ausgabe von Thomas Werner (Herausgeber), Renate Ludwig (Bearbeitung), & 3 mehr Geben Sie die erste Bewertung für diesen Artikel ab – 1999).



Fig. 16. The woman dress with bells the jewelry from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 17. The women jewelry with bells from Crimea (Neapolis Scythian). Photo by the authors of the article.

### III. ABOUT THE SCYTHIAN CHORDOPHONES

The Scythian harp from the Altai as well as the ancient Greek lyre from the Neapolis Scythian were ritual musical instruments and could be used as magic subject in the burial ceremonies. The authentic instrument in Pazyryk and the image of the musician with the instrument in Crimea were found in the graves.

In the ancient period, the Scythians in Siberia (including Altai) worked in a wide variety of materials such as wood, leather, bronze, iron, silver, gold. It was important their art were symbolic. The boat-shape resonator of the Pazyryk harp was cut out of whole piece of a wood and was covered with the skin membrane “Fig. 18”, “Fig. 19”, “Fig. 20”, “Fig. 21”, “Fig. 22”, “Fig. 23”.

Researcher Bo Lawergren and his work about Western influences on the early Chinese Qin-zither analyses different types of the ancient harps and lyres which could be the prototypes of the modern plucked instruments. These chordophones in Eurasia can be the results of the cultural and artistic contacts of the different ethnic groups.

Apparently it's possible to represent the Scythian chordophone from Altai as the borrowed model of the plucked harps.





Fig. 18. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 19. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 20. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 21. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 22. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 23. The Scythian harp from the Pazyryk burial in Altai (V century BC). Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Photo by the authors of the article.

The similar chordophones are used by Altaic and Turkic ethnic groups in contemporary period both in Russia and in Kazakhstan—for example, such as adyrna with its zoomorphic symbols “Fig. 24”.



Fig. 24. Kazakh chordophone adyrna.

A lyre player image from the Neapolis Scythian in Crimea is represented on a fresco near the images of a carpet, a horseman with two dogs and a boar. The musician is the Scythian nobleman in rich clothes “Fig. 25”, “Fig. 26”, “Fig. 27”, “Fig. 28”, “Fig. 29”, “Fig. 30”, “Fig. 31”, “Fig. 32”.

The lyre is similar the ancient Greek lyre. Perhaps such instruments were made in Greece or by Greeks in Crimea (as well as the gold jewelry) and then were bought and used by the Scythians.



Fig. 25. The fresco image of the Scythian man with a lyre from the Necropolis crypt No. 9 in Neapolis Scythian. The picture by O. Dombrovsky. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 26. The carpet and the image of the Scythian man with a lyre on the fresco from the Neapolis Scythian. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea.

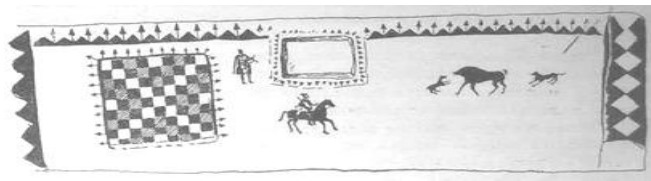


Fig. 27. The carpet and the image of the Scythian man with a lyre on the fresco from the Neapolis Scythian. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea.

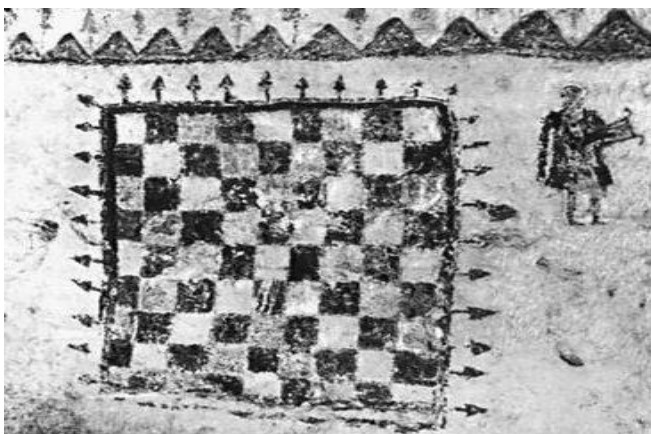


Fig. 28. The carpet and the image of the Scythian man with a lyre on the fresco from the Neapolis Scythian. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea.



Fig. 29. The carpet and the image of the Scythian man with a lyre on the fresco from the Neapolis Scythian. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea.



Fig. 30. The Scyth with Lyre from Crimea. The picture by O. Dombrovsky. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea.



Fig. 31. The Scyth with Lyre from Crimea. Replica. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



Fig. 32. The Scyth with Lyre from Crimea. Replica. Central Museum of Tavrida, Simferopol City, Crimea. Photo by the authors of the article.



#### IV. ABOUT THE MODERN RECONSTRUCTION OF SCYTHIAN CHORDOPHONES

In contemporary Russia, the Scythian chordophones are not only archeological artifacts in museums. They have become models for modern instruments which are even used in concert performances.

The master on manufacturing of musical instruments from Barnaul (Altai) Alexander Gnezdilov has created several chordophones with different number of strings as the models of the Pazyryk harp. In 2000, he had a report with the demonstration of his invention at the Russian Institute of Art History in St. Petersburg. It mentions one of the instrument he presented to the State Glinka Central Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow on the 100th anniversary "Fig. 33", "Fig. 34".



Fig. 33. The modern models of the Scythian harps by A. Gnezdilov.



Fig. 34. The modern models of the Scythian harps by A. Gnezdilov.

The musical ensemble "Uncle Goh" (Barnaul, Altai) uses the Scythian harps manufactured by Gnezdilov and idiophones as well as a number of the archaic and ancient and musical instruments in the performances. The ensemble has the Scythian musical project that includes concerts programmes "Ahtavar's Day" (2 Suites), "Akhtamar's Night", "Akhtamar's winds" and the soundtrack to the movie about the Altai Mountains.

Modern Russian singer Elena Frolova accompanies herself on the Scythian harp manufactured by Gnezdilov during the performance of the author's cycle "Scythian songs" on poems by Marina Tsvetaeva.

#### V. CONCLUSION

It's possible to study the idiophones and chordophones of the Altaic and Crimean Scythians in a comparative way. Their shapes, constructions, functions could be the results of the Scythians' contacts with other ethnic groups in Siberia and with Greeks in Crimea.

Modern using of the Scythian idiophones and chordophones models represent the sounds and musical possibilities of the ancient instruments.

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