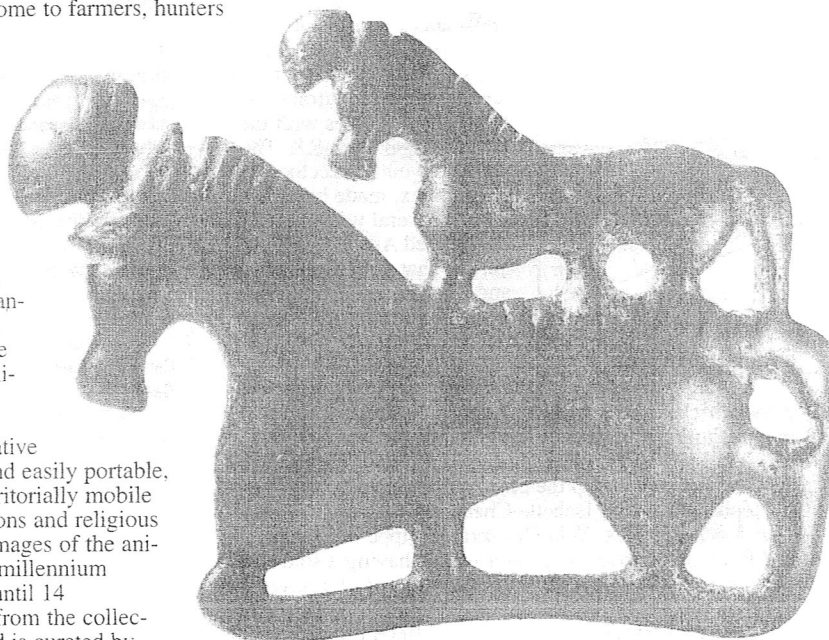


**Ancient bronzes
of the Asian Grasslands
from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation
Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens**

From northern China, through Mongolia to the plains of eastern Europe, the steppes or grasslands were home to farmers, hunters and herdsman from 2000 BC to 900 BC. Living mainly by trading meat, wool and leather to Asian city-dwellers in exchange for manufactured goods, the steppe or grassland peoples also acted as guides and suppliers along the supply routes between China and the West. The horse, first domesticated in the steppes, was integral to this business and the steppe dwellers later became horse dealers. Although they were not linguistically united, they shared a similar social organisations, manners of dress and living, and spiritual beliefs. Most of our knowledge is derived, on the one hand, from Herodotus and the Chinese chroniclers and, on the other, from the discoveries made in the past 30 years by Chinese and Russian archaeologists. Highly prized decorative items were made of bronze—very durable and easily portable, qualities necessary in a socially fluid and territorially mobile society—for personal ornament, tools, weapons and religious objects, taking the forms of highly worked images of the animal world, real and imagined, as in the first-millennium equine buckle shown here. This exhibition (until 14 September) presents 80 such works on loan from the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation and is curated by Trudy Kawami, the foundation's director of research. **D.L.**



Bronze equine buckle. 1st-2nd millennium. Courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Foundation.

An ancient art rooted in Asian grasslands

Museum of Cycladic Art's ongoing exhibition of Sackler Foundation artefacts sheds light on a relatively unexplored nomadic culture

By Christy Papadopoulou

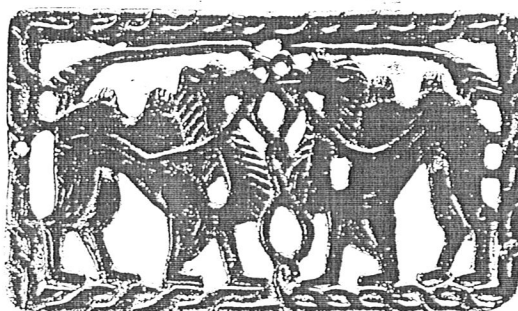
LEADING a mobile, nomadic life, dependent on Eurasian grasslands' ability to nurture their livestock, steppe dwellers boasted of a remarkable ancient craft - a relatively unexplored research field for modern-day scholars.

Highly ornate and richly patterned buckles, tools and weapons currently exhibited at the capital's Museum of Cycladic Art point to the pastoral cultures that flourished during the late 2nd and 1st millennia BC in the region extending across the ancient grasslands, from northern China and Mongolia to eastern Europe.

Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands presents for the first time 80 select artefacts from the Arthur M Sackler Foundation's 900-piece strong collection put together by a research psychiatrist, medical publisher and fervent art collector from Brooklyn, New York.

Chinese ritual bronzes and ceramics, Buddhist stone sculptures and the oldest Chinese written document - known as the *Chu Silk Manuscript* - are also listed in the precious holdings of the New York-based foundation, established in 1965.

Curated by the foundation's director of research, Dr Tracy S Kawami, the exhibition casts the spotlight on objects of daily use - often revelatory of an



individual's rank in the tribal unit - and paraphernalia associated to shamanism, the belief system of the steppe people. Farmers, hunters and fishermen turned into riders and breeders, steppe dwellers made an extensive use of bronze - a light-weight, yet resilient material.

Used to hold together their garments, buckles often come adorned with animal or bird motifs - anthropocentric subjects are rather rare - pointing to a life-sustaining bond with nature. Animal iconography is often invested with symbolic connotations indicating one's tribe, social rank and connections to the spirit world.

Horses - the first animals to be domesticated at the steppes and, according to Greek historian Herodotus - often sacrificed by western steppe peoples at the burial of important chiefs - are frequently encountered. Bronze plaques showing animals copulating or nursing their young are suggestive of the theme of fertility, a prerequisite for the continuation of a people.

As Kawami points out, violent struggle scenes depicting wild felines attacking deer and camels "may refer to political, territorial or ethnic strife among the steppe peoples themselves". Finally, shamans were said to disguise themselves as the animals that were their messengers.

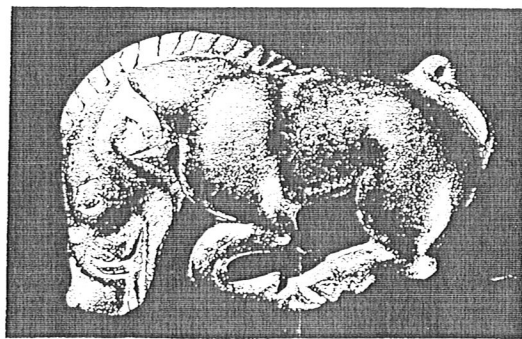
More frequently encountered compared to weapons such as swords and daggers, knives were considered to be essential equipment for both sexes. On display are unadorned tools for daily use as well as

others, bearing complex casting decoration, which probably belong to high-ranking individuals and served for display of personal status.

Shamanism as a means of linking the mundane and the supernatural was an integral part of these peoples' lives. Steaming cauldrons were used not as utilitarian cooking pots but as ritual vessels for the mixing of psychotropic herbs. Bells and jingles, often used by a male or female shaman to achieve a state of trance or ecstasy, as well as miniature spoons for crushing and dispensing the herbs used in rituals

were common burial goods accompanying shamans to the grave.

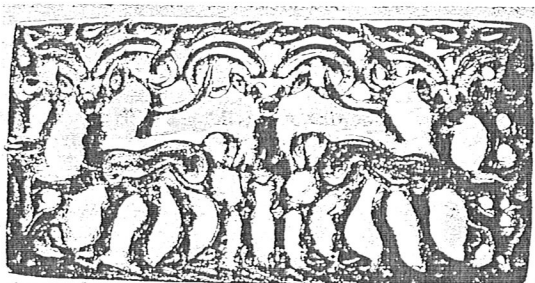
The show comes complete with five ritual vessels of Chinese origin. Those were transferred to the steppe



as gifts to tribal chiefs by Chinese noblemen or dowry to chiefs of allied tribes betrothed to women of noble origin.

Following its Athens premiere the show will travel to the Ferenc Mora Museum in Szeged, Hungary before it features in spring 2003 at the Narpste Museum in Prague.

✓ *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands* from the Arthur M Sackler Foundation is on at the Museum of Cycladic Art's new wing (Stathafos Mansion, cnr Herodotou & Vas Sofias sts, Kolonaki, tel 010-72. 8321-3). Open: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday 10am-4pm, Saturday 10am-3pm. Sunday and Tuesday closed.



Second century BC buckle plaques from southern Siberia (L) and northwestern China (C), and Wild boar ornament from northern China or inner Mongolia (5th-3rd century BC)

The other side of the Great Wall

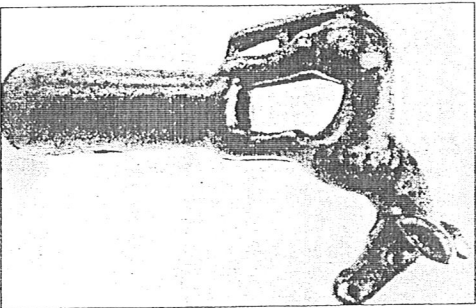
By NICHOLAS PAPHTIS
KATHIMERINI ENGLISH EDITION

Like the much smaller wall built by Hadrian in Britain, the Great Wall of China carved a dividing line between a highly sophisticated civilization and what that same civilization could only regard as a seething mass of rapacious barbarians.

Although neither fortification work was, in the long run, able to stop the tribes, in both cases history was kinder to the wall-builders — literate cultures that left comprehensive records of their past and were so remarkable in their achievements as to deservedly hog scholarly attention.

But rather sooner for the Picts and Scots, and later for the nomadic peoples of the eastern steppes, archaeology came to sketch small doodles on the largely blank sheets of barbarian history.

Some of these are now on display at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, in a new exhibition that focuses on the tribes the Chinese were so eager to keep out that they built a 2,400-kilometer-long, nine-meter-high wall to that purpose in the late third century BC.



A 2,500-year-old horse figurine from a funeral canopy.

"Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation," which was inaugurated last week, brings together some 80 pieces from the New York-based foundation, and comes to Greece on the first stop of a European tour.

Archaeologist Dimitris Plantzos, who coordinated the display on be-

half of the museum, sees the works as representative of an art that is "practical and laconic, but also impressive due to its simplicity."

"They open a window on man's environment before he became a city-dweller, when he lived in social groups that were often strictly hierarchical and socially stratified but had not yet lost their direct contact with nature," he said.

The artifacts — ornaments, weapons, vessels and ritual objects — were made in the second and first millennia BC and come from northwestern China and Inner Mongolia. They belonged to people from diverse ethnic groups such as the fierce Xiongnu or Hsiung-nu (the Asian Huns who terrorized the Chinese for centuries), the Xianbei and the Wuhan.

As exhibition curator Thudy S. Kawami, director of research at the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, points out, "the mobile lifestyle of the steppe-dwellers required art objects that were easy to wear, carry or pack. They favored bronze for its strength, light weight and resilience."

Metalworking was probably undertaken by a distinct itinerant group among the pastoralist

steppe peoples who performed a function similar to that of the tinkers in English tradition. Although the average nomad family needed metal, its requirements were not such as to keep a smith employed throughout the year. Therefore, metal goods were most likely traded at regular fairs at which nomads would converge from large areas of the steppe.

Although the horseriding tribes adopted metallurgical traditions developed in China and western Asia, they would have mined their own ore from sources within the steppes.

A large part of the exhibition consists of ornate buckle plaques decorated with animal forms. Archaeologists believe the size and ornamentation of the buckles would have corresponded to their wearers' social status, while specific animals may have had clan or totemic associations.

Backed with wood occasionally lined with felt, the buckles and other decorative features were attached to the nomads' leather, sleeved jackets that were clasped with leather belts from which hung tools and weapons. Men wore trousers and women long skirts,

while members of both sexes sported long riding boots.

Despite their frequent wars with the Chinese, the steppe peoples also traded furs, leather, the prized "celestial" Ferghana horses, cattle and goods from the west for Imperial silk. Chinese princesses are recorded to have been given in marriage to barbarian rulers whose favor the Empire courted — not always with success.

One of the main Chinese gains from their conflict with the nomads was a better knowledge of Central Asian geography, which eventually led to the development of the Silk Road.

"The steppe peoples' intimate knowledge of the routes across the steppes and mountains, the sources of water and the seasonal changes in climate were invaluable to the caravans," Kawami says. "By guiding and supplying the trade caravans, the steppe-dwellers played an essential role in the exchange of goods and ideas between East and West."

The exhibition runs until September 14 at the Cycladic Art Museum on 4 Neophytou Douka Street. Tel. 010/722.8321-3.