

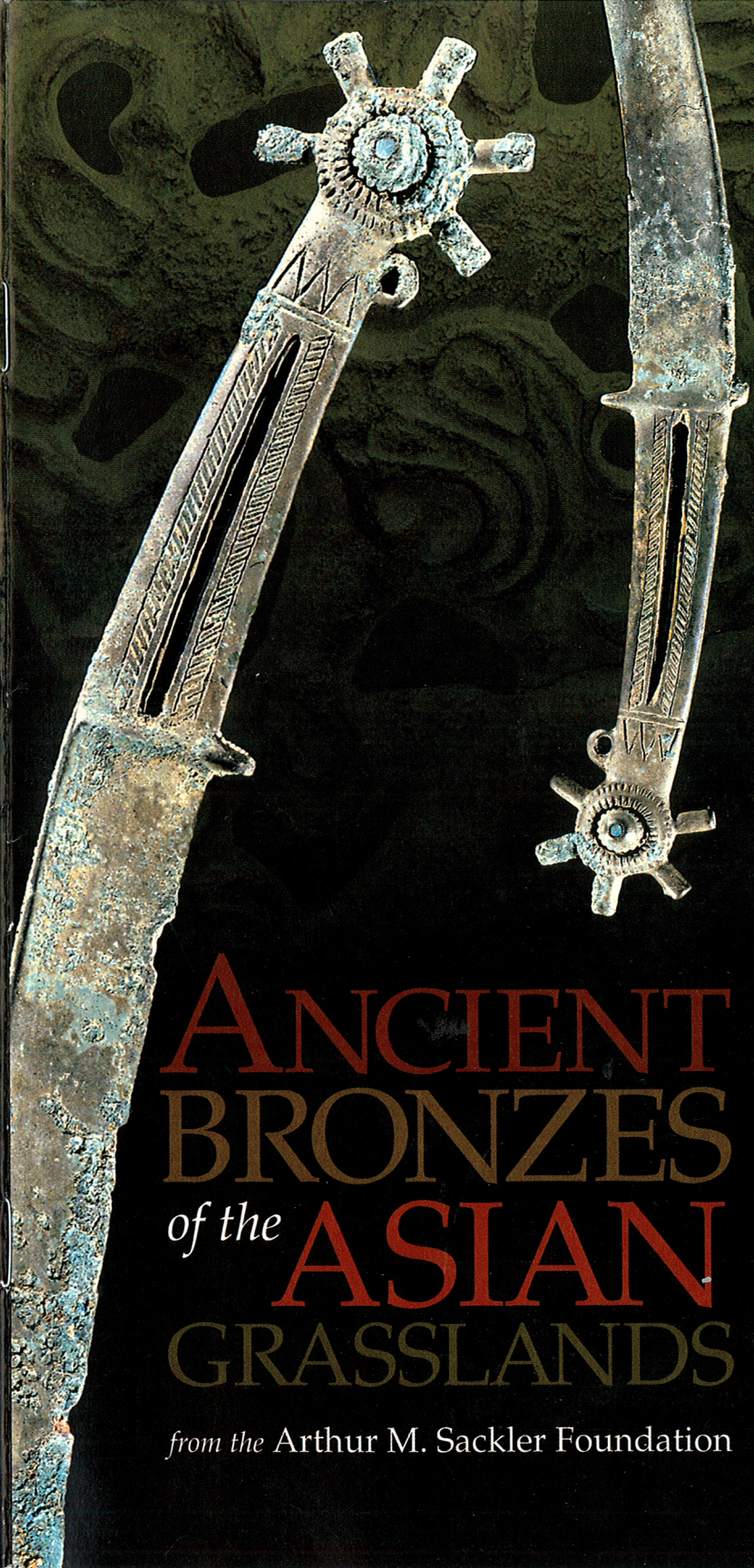
The Arthur M. Sackler Foundation was founded in 1965 by Arthur M. Sackler, M.D. (1913–1987), a research psychiatrist, medical publisher, connoisseur and collector of art. Dr. Sackler established the Foundation to make his extensive art collections available to the general public. He once said, "Great art, like science and the humanities, can never remain as the possession of one individual, creator or collector . . . great art and all culture belongs to all humankind."

The Foundation collection was formed through purchases of art selected by Dr. Sackler and gifts from Dr. Sackler and his family. It consists of over 1,000 works of art ranging from Chinese ritual bronzes and ceramics to Buddhist stone sculpture and the renowned Chu Silk Manuscript, the oldest existing Chinese written document.

Since 1973, the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation has organized exhibitions of the Foundation's collection and the Arthur M. Sackler Collections, and published eleven scholarly catalogues of the Arthur M. Sackler Collections. The Foundation has donated art to several museums in the United States, and currently has art on loan to many museums including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Newark Museum; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

www.arthursacklerfoundation.org

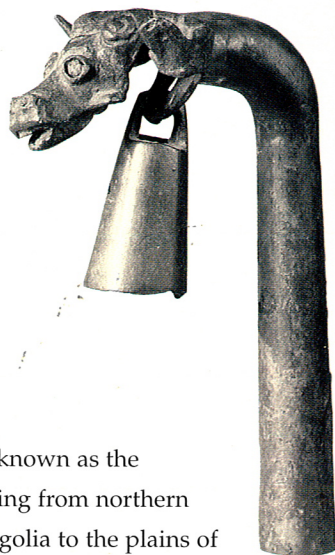
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ANCIENT
BRONZES
of the ASIAN
GRASSLANDS

from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation

Figure 1.
Finial (72.2.534)
Northwestern China
12th–10th century BCE
12 x 4 x 7 cm



Introduction

The Eurasian grasslands, also known as the steppes, cover a region extending from northern China westward through Mongolia to the plains of Eastern Europe. This exhibition focuses on the eastern or Asian steppes whose rolling grassy plains are punctuated by snow-topped mountain ranges like the Tien Shan (Heavenly Mountains), and deserts like the Gobi and the Taklamakan (see map). The eastern steppes were home to a remarkable ancient culture, whose art, richly decorated with animal motifs, is only now beginning to be understood by scholars.

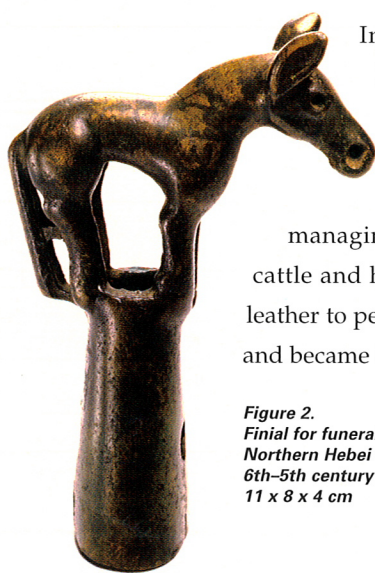


Figure 2.
Finial for funeral canopy (V-3848)
Northern Hebei and western Liaoning, China
6th–5th century BCE
11 x 8 x 4 cm

In 2000 BCE, villages of farmers, hunters and fishermen populated the grasslands. By 1400 BCE many people left their villages to range widely over the steppes, managing herds of sheep (Fig. 1), goats, cattle and horses. They sold meat, wool and leather to people living in the cities of Asia, and became increasingly dependent on the



Figure 3.
Belt ornament (V-3606)
Northwestern China
4th century BCE
4 x 5 cm

settled population for agricultural produce and manufactured goods. Horses, first domesticated in the steppes, were integral to this new way of life (Fig. 2). They allowed the herdsmen to range farther for grass, and to manage larger flocks and herds. By 900 BCE the steppe dwellers, now legendary as riders and breeders, began to supply horses to the empires of eastern and western Asia. The famous trade routes linking Asia and Europe in ancient times, such as the Silk Road that connected China and Rome, traversed the grasslands. 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 (Fig. 3). 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.



Figure 4.
Buckle (V-3466)
South-central Inner Mongolia
6th century BCE
5 x 6 cm

The Steppe Peoples

The steppe peoples were pastoralists who traveled to specific regions in a seasonal cycle to provide pasture for their livestock. They had no permanent dwellings, living instead in portable, tent-like structures. Both men and women of the ancient steppes wore sleeved jackets, a garment they invented and that we still wear today. The jacket, secured at the waist by a belt and simple buckle (Fig. 4), was usually made of leather, a sturdy and practical material for people who were outside for extended periods.

Trousers completed the men's dress; women usually wore long full skirts. Men and women both wore tall, soft boots. Most likely the steppe dwellers were organized around family, clan, and tribal units, with the family being the smallest unit and the tribe the largest. Authority was awarded by consensus and tradition similar to modern tribal cultures. At times, charismatic leaders would emerge to unite the tribes into a large and powerful confederation, or to respond to threats from settled populations.

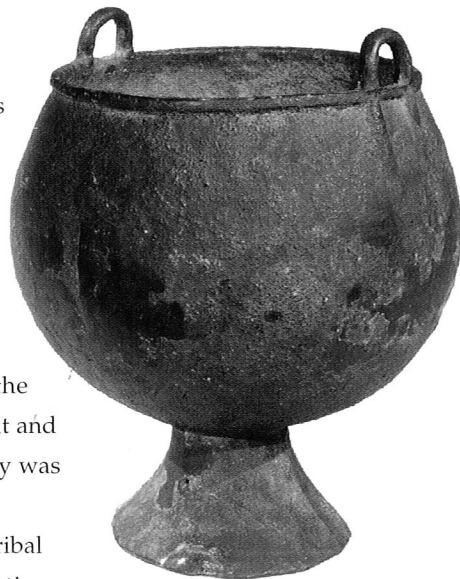


Figure 5.
Cauldron (V-68)
Northern Hebei and
western Liaoning, China
7th–6th century BCE
27 x 22 cm

years by Chinese and Russian researchers. These excavations have focused on the large cemeteries that probably served as clan or tribal centers. To judge from grave goods, there was a fair amount of intermarriage between high-ranking individuals of different clans and tribes. We also know from Chinese historical accounts that their princesses were married to grasslands chieftains to secure allegiance and cooperation.



Figure 7.
Finial with rattle (V-7415)
Northwestern China
12th century BCE
9 x 4 cm

The Spirit World

Steppe dwellers practiced shamanism to engage the spirit world. The shaman was a special individual, male or female, who linked the mundane, real world and the supernatural. To enter a trance-like or ecstatic state the shaman would chant, drum, dance, repeatedly jingle small bells, and inhale the fumes of psychotropic herbs from steaming cauldrons (Fig. 5). In this condition, the shaman could contact animal and human spirits and the forces of nature (Fig. 6). Magical animal companions might serve the shaman as messengers and as means of transportation. At times the shaman could also take on the shape of these animals. Shamans are identifiable by their burial goods that included bells, jingles, rattles (Fig. 7), and small spoons (Fig. 8) with which to grind, measure and dispense sacred herbs.



Figure 8.
Spoon (V-3062)
Northeastern China
8th–6th century BCE
4 x 1.5 cm

Though they belonged to different tribes and clans, and spoke several different languages, the people who lived in the Asian grasslands shared the same manner of living, dress, social organization and spiritual beliefs. They left few written records of their own, so some of our knowledge is based on the accounts of ancient writers who were not part of their culture like the Greek historian Herodotus and the ancient Chinese chroniclers.

Most of our information comes from archaeological excavations carried out over the last thirty

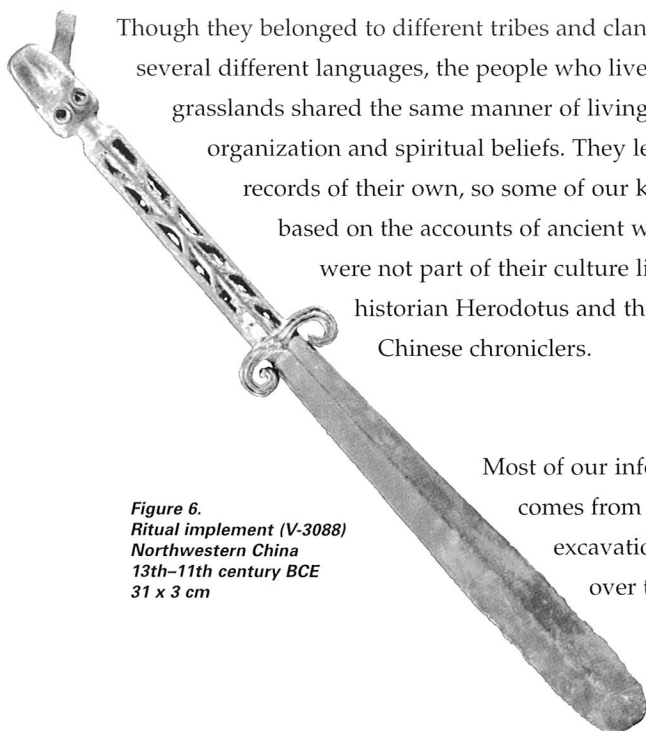
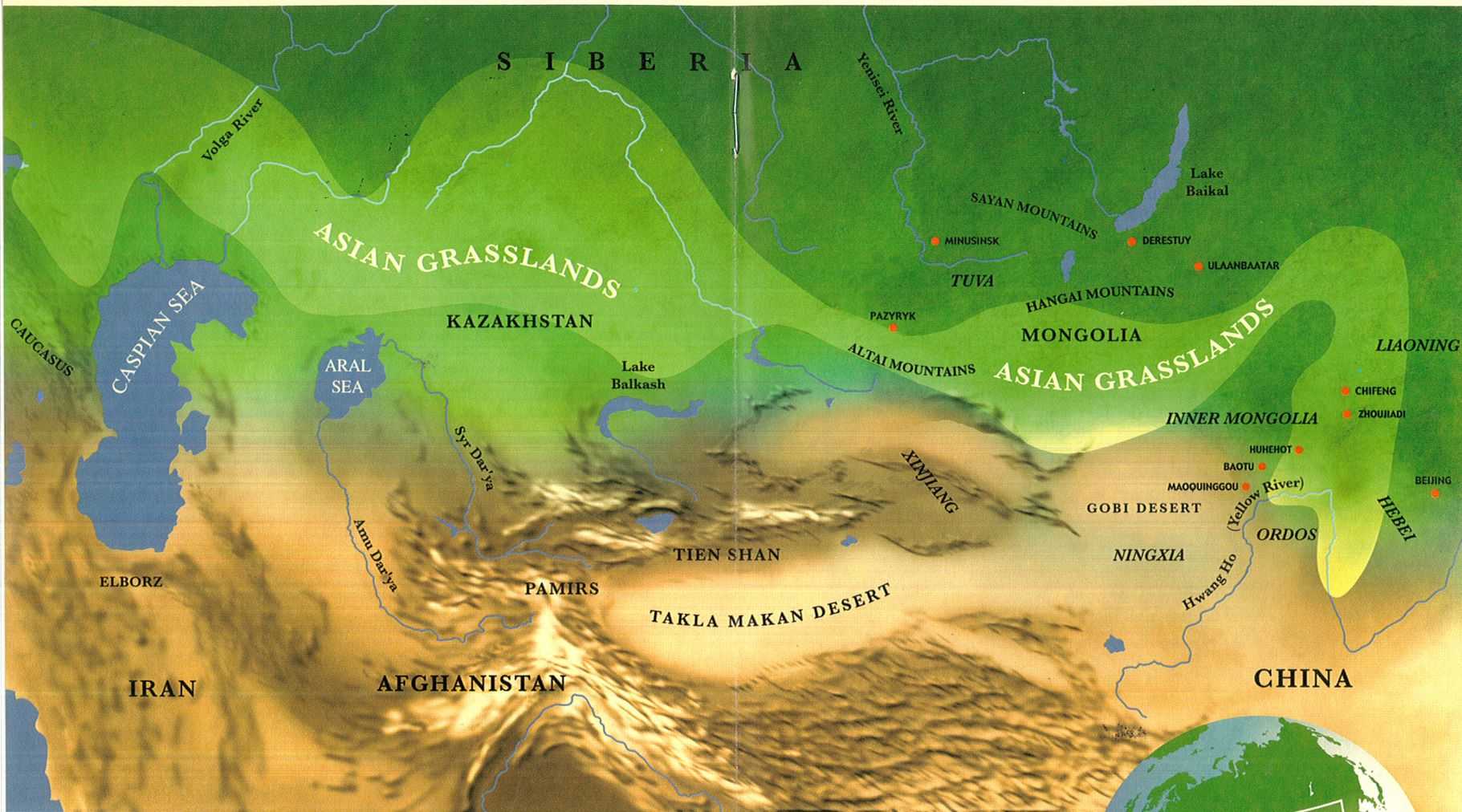


Figure 6.
Ritual implement (V-3088)
Northwestern China
13th–11th century BCE
31 x 3 cm

The Asian Grasslands



Personal Ornaments

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. The degree of decoration on the clothing varied

according to the rank, status and wealth of the wearer (Fig. 9). High-ranking men and women were buried in clothes covered with small gold plaques. Decorative one- and two-piece bronze buckles (Fig. 10) which varied in size and intricacy of design, were important in conveying status. The larger and more ornate the buckle, the higher the rank of the person who wore it.



Figure 9.
Garment plaque (V-3165)
Beijing district, northern China
6th–5th century BCE
3.5 x 4 cm



Figure 10.
Buckle plaque (V-7021)
Southern Siberia
2nd century BCE
10 x 6 cm

Steppe artisans made small bronze ornaments in abstracted animal (Fig. 11) and bird forms. Similar bronze ornaments decorated the horses that carried the steppe dwellers in life, and were often buried with them in death. Bronze is the best-documented artistic

Figure 11.
Ornament (V-7185)
Northern China or
Inner Mongolia
5th–3rd century BCE
2 x 5 cm

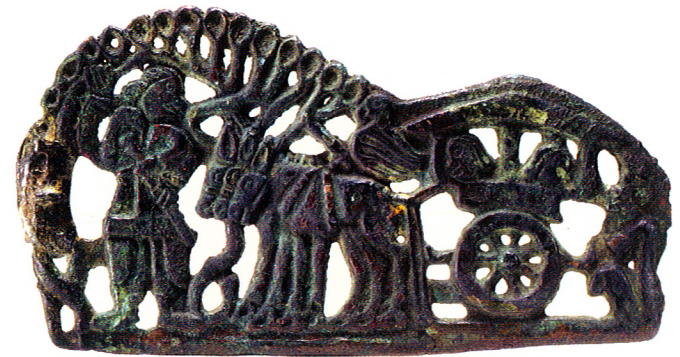
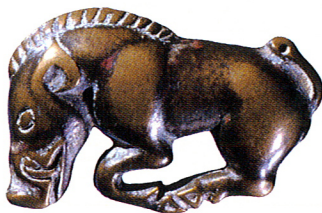


Figure 12.
Buckle plaque (V-7013)
Mongolia, eastern or southern Siberia
2nd–1st century BCE
7 x 13 cm

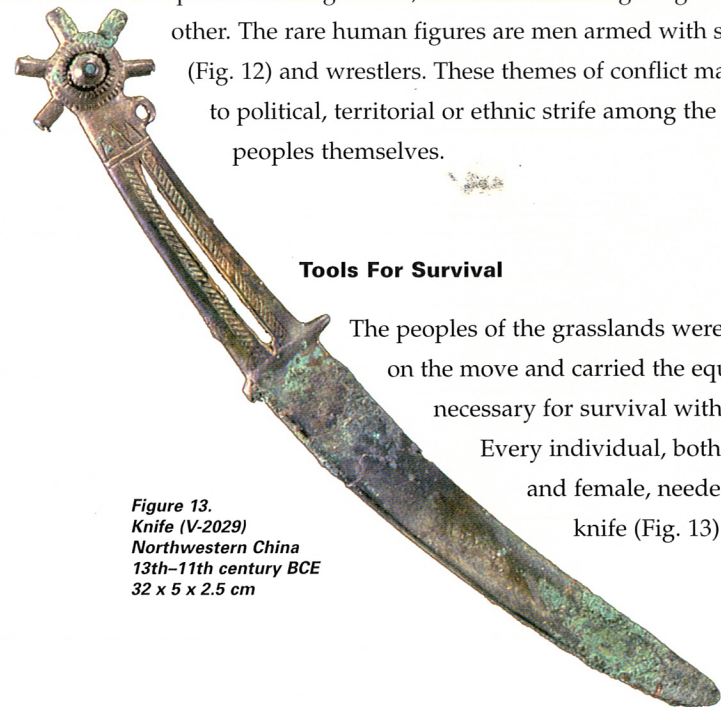
medium, but remains of wool and silk textiles, felt appliqués, wooden cups, leather bags and birch bark containers have also been excavated.

Violent struggle and forceful opposition are central themes in the art of the grasslands. The belt buckles, plaques and ornaments usually feature predators, wild felines attacking deer and camels, raptors attacking felines, and even horses fighting each other. The rare human figures are men armed with swords (Fig. 12) and wrestlers. These themes of conflict may refer to political, territorial or ethnic strife among the steppe peoples themselves.

Tools For Survival

The peoples of the grasslands were often on the move and carried the equipment necessary for survival with them. Every individual, both male and female, needed a knife (Fig. 13) to cut

Figure 13.
Knife (V-2029)
Northwestern China
13th–11th century BCE
32 x 5 x 2.5 cm



vegetation, meat, leather and wood; an awl or punch to make holes in leather; needles for sewing; and cases in which to keep these pointed tools. Steppe dwellers used axes and adzes to cut firewood and fashion wooden bowls and cups, and to dig holes and pound in pegs for tents, canopies and animal tethers. For hunting they used bows and arrows tipped with bone or metal points, kept in bow-cases and quivers that could be highly decorated. Weapons, such as short swords or daggers (Fig. 14) and battle axes, were relatively rare, probably because they had no use in daily life.

Figure 14.
Short sword (V-7420)
Northwestern China
12th–11th century BCE
28 x 6 cm



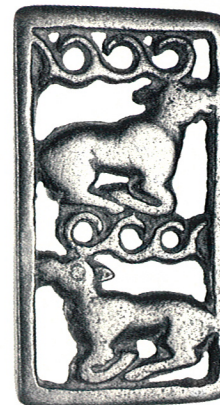
The Animal World

The steppe dwellers depended upon both the domestic animals that they herded—horses, sheep, goats and camels—and the wild animals they hunted, especially deer, giant *argali* sheep, mountain goats and ibex (Figs. 15 & 16). The powerful predators of the near-



Figure 15.
Buckle plaque (V-7009)
Northwestern China
2nd–1st century BCE
14 x 6.5 cm

Figure 16.
Garment plaque (V-7108)
Northern Hebei and western
Liaoning, China
6th–5th century BCE
4 x 2 cm



by mountains—leopards, Siberian tigers, bears and birds of prey—appear in their art. The representation of wild and domesticated animals in the personal ornaments of the steppe peoples illustrates their profound identification with the animal life around them.

Some animals were probably tribal or clan totems. Their image proclaimed membership in a specific social group. Fantastic animals like wolves with stag antlers and dragon-like creatures (Fig. 17) may refer to myths, epics and legends, aspects of religious beliefs now forgotten.

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Exhibition Curator
Director of Research
Arthur M. Sackler Foundation



Figure 17.
Buckle plaque (V-3925)
Buryatia, eastern or southern Siberia
2nd century BCE
7 x 14 cm