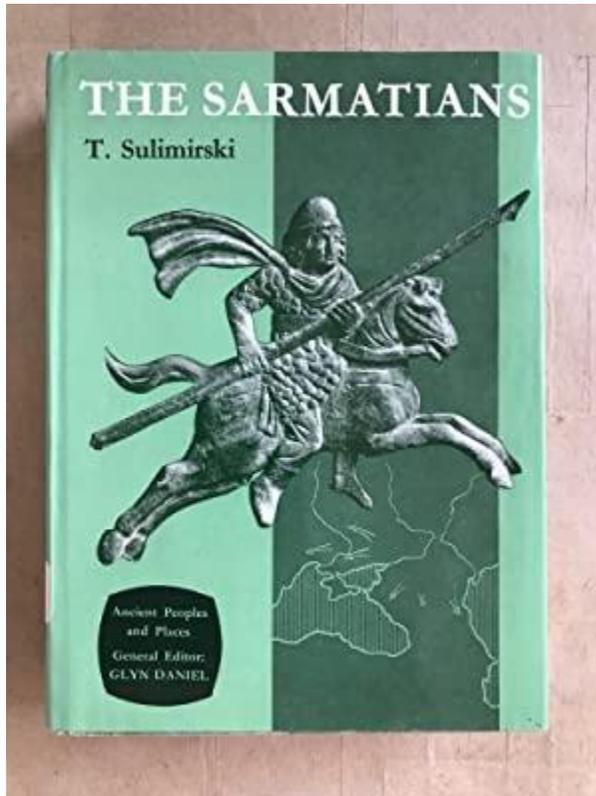


Are some Poles descendants of the ancient Sarmatians?

The Sarmatians by Sulimirski, Tadeusz: Very Good Hardcover (1970) | CALVELLO BOOKS, since 1987 (abebooks.com) – 7/5/2022

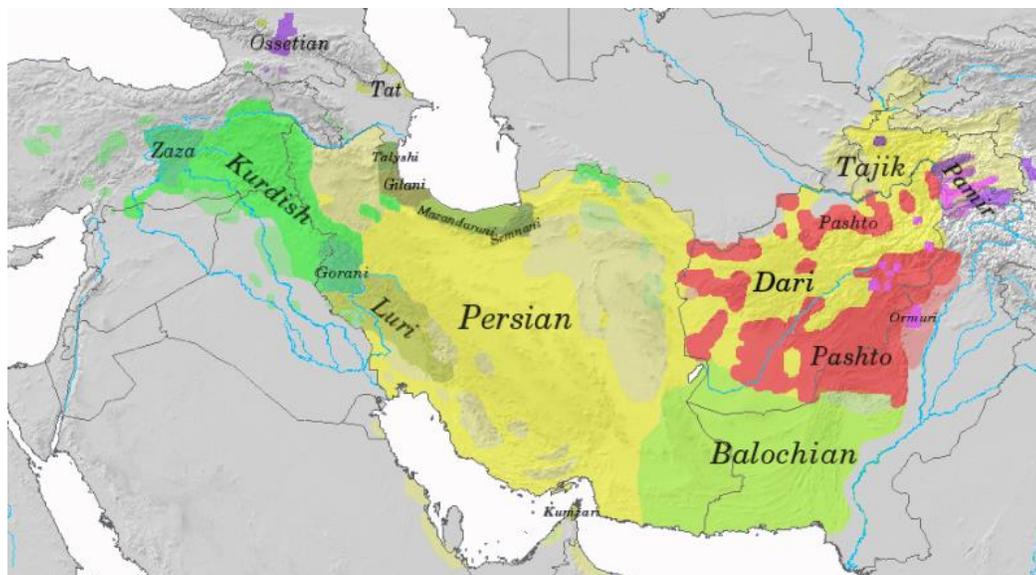


About this Item

Small quarto in pale green illus. jacket; 267 pages : illustrations, maps, plan ; 21 cm. bibliographical references (pages 213-218). Numerous high quality b&w photo reprints. Series: Ancient peoples and places, v. 73 || Contents: List of illustrations -- Chronological table -- Foreword -- Introduction -- The Sarmatian dawn: Sixth and Fifth Centuries BC -- The Early Sarmatian period: Fourth and Third Centuries BC -- The Middle Sarmatian period: Second Century BC to mid-First Century AD -- The late Sarmatian period: mid-First to Fourth Century AD -- Epilogue -- Notes on the text. || Sarmatians (Sauromatians); Antiquities. Sarmatians. Ex-lib with usual markings; else very good

in very good(+) jacket. Seller Inventory # 91911

The **Sarmatians** ([/sɑːrˈmeɪʃjən/](#); [Greek](#): Σαρμάται, Σαυρομάται; [Latin](#): *Sarmatae* [[ˈsar.matae](#)], *Sauromatae* [[sauˈromatae](#)]) were a **large Iranian confederation** that existed in [classical antiquity](#), flourishing from about the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD.



Regions with significant populations - [Western Asia](#) and eastern half of [Anatolia](#), [Caucasus](#) and [Ossetia](#), [Central Asia](#), western parts of [South Asia](#), western [Xinjiang](#) (Historically also: [Eastern Europe](#))



Originating in the central parts of the [Eurasian Steppe](#), the Sarmatians were part of the wider [Scythian cultures](#).^[1] They started migrating westward around the fourth and third centuries BC, coming to dominate the closely related [Scythians](#) by 200 BC. At their greatest reported extent, around 100 BC, these tribes ranged from the [Vistula River](#) to the mouth of the [Danube](#) and eastward to the [Volga](#), bordering the shores of the [Black](#) and [Caspian](#) seas as well as the [Caucasus](#) to the south.

Eurasian steppe belt (turquoise)



The location of the Black Sea

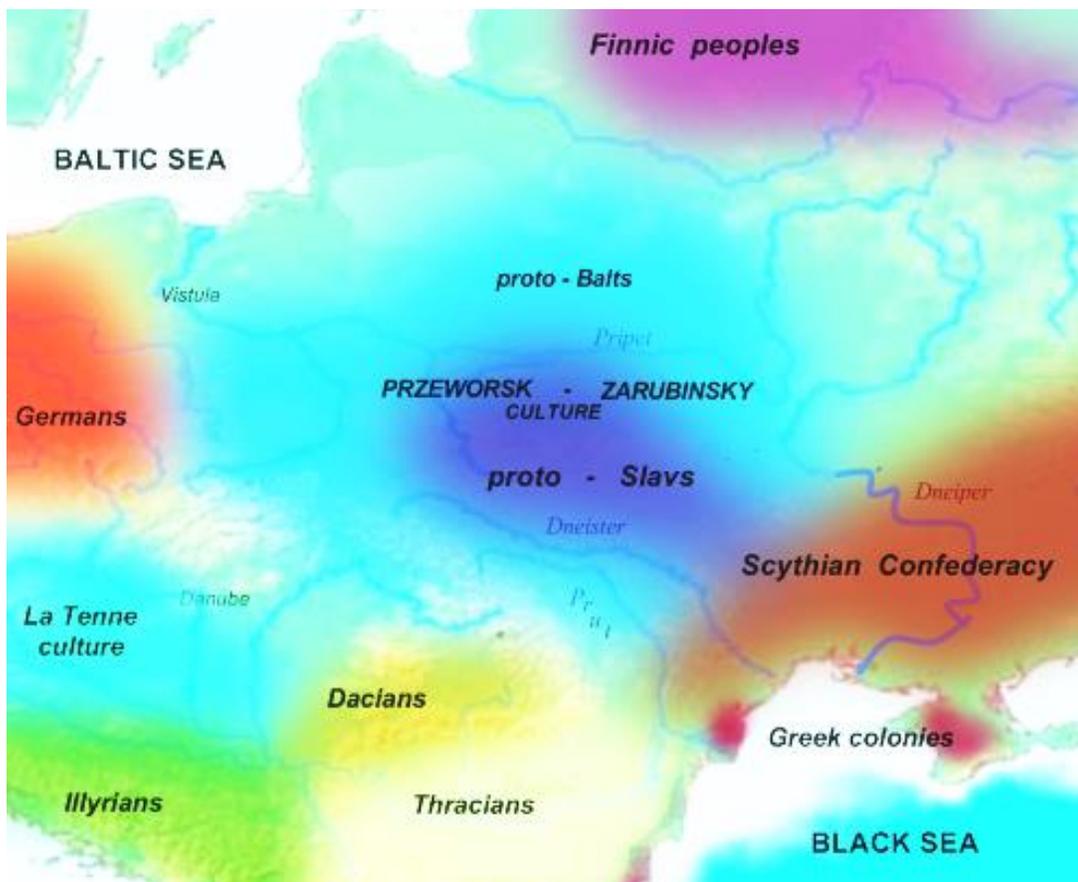
Their territory, which was known as **Sarmatia** (*/sɑːrˈmeɪʃə/*) to [Greco-Roman ethnographers](#), corresponded to the western part of greater [Scythia](#) (it included today's [Central Ukraine](#), South-Eastern Ukraine, [Southern Russia](#), Russian [Volga](#), and [South-Ural regions](#), also to a smaller extent northeastern [Balkans](#) and around [Moldova](#)). **In the first century AD, the Sarmatians began encroaching upon the Roman Empire** in alliance with [Germanic tribes](#). In the third century AD, their dominance of the [Pontic Steppe](#) was broken by the Germanic [Goths](#). With

the [Hunnic](#) invasions of the fourth century, many Sarmatians joined the Goths and other Germanic tribes ([Vandals](#)) in the settlement of the [Western Roman Empire](#). Since large parts of today's Russia, specifically the land between the [Ural Mountains](#) and the [Don River](#), were controlled in the fifth century BC by the Sarmatians, the Volga–Don and Ural steppes sometimes are called "Sarmatian Motherland".^{[2][3]}

The Sarmatians were eventually decisively assimilated (e.g. [Slavicisation](#)) and absorbed by the [Proto-Slavic](#) population of Eastern Europe.



Scythia and other [Eastern Iranian speaking](#) lands (shown in orange) c. 170 AD^[1]



Map of the Slavic homeland. Early Slavic artifacts are most often linked to the [Przeworsk](#) and [Zarubintsy](#) cultures.

In the Pontic Steppe and Europe

The centre of power of the Sarmatians during the 4th to 3rd centuries BCE remained in the areas to the north of the Caucasus, and in the 3rd century BCE the most important Sarmatian centres were in the lower Don area, **Kalmykia**, the **Kuban** area, and the Central Caucasus.^{[10][9]}



The steppe extends roughly from the **Danube** to the **Ural River**. In this map is shown the region known as Pontic Steppe, which is the biggest portion of the whole Pontic-Caspian Steppe



The Pontic-Caspian steppe in c. 650

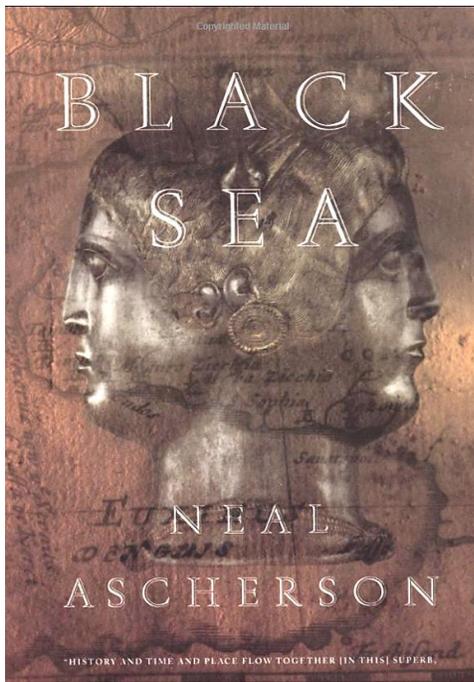
The **Pontic–Caspian steppe**, - [Pontic–Caspian steppe - Wikipedia](#) - formed by the Caspian steppe and the Pontic steppe, is the **steppeland** stretching from the northern shores of the **Black Sea** (the **Pontus Euxinus** of antiquity) to the northern area around the **Caspian Sea**. It extends from **Dobruja** in the northeastern corner of **Bulgaria** and southeastern **Romania**, through **Moldova** and southern and eastern **Ukraine**, across the **Russian Northern Caucasus**, the **Southern** and **lower Volga** regions to western **Kazakhstan**, adjacent to the **Kazakh steppe** to the east, both forming part of the larger **Eurasian Steppe**. It forms a part of the **Palaearctic realm** and of the **temperate grasslands, savannas, and shrublands biome**.



[*Tulipa suaveolens*](#), one of the most typical spring flowers of the Pontic-Caspian steppe



Map showing the Azov Sea, the early growth of the Bosphoran Kingdom (eastern Crimea and eastern coast of the Azov Sea, before its annexation by Mithridates VI of Pontus.(389 BC – 69 AD)



Black Sea – by [Neal Ascherson](#)

(Author) - [Black Sea - Google Books](#)

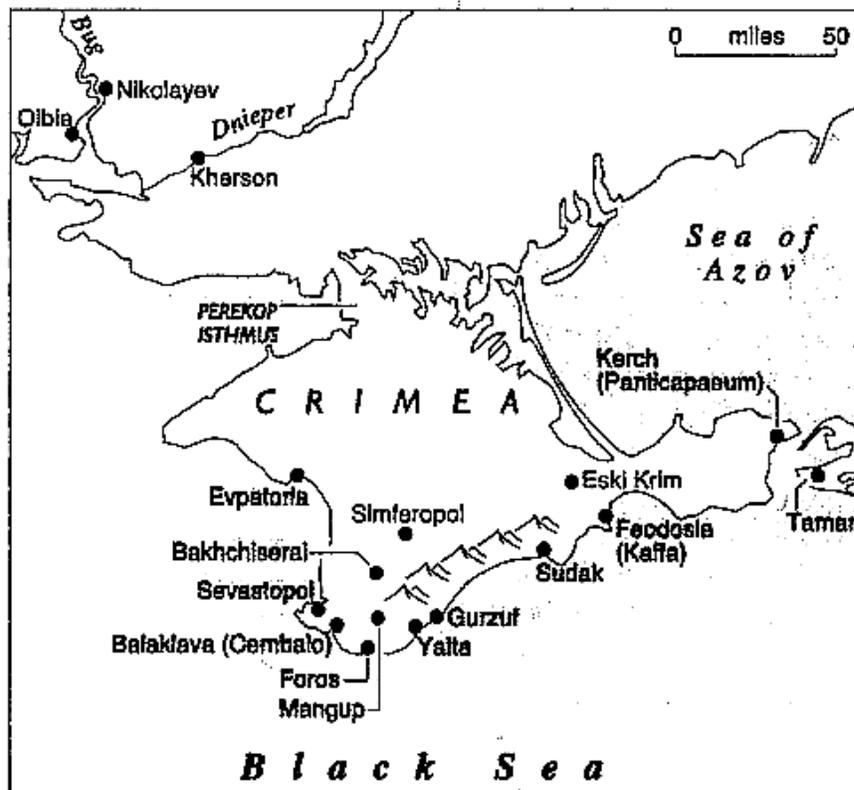
(Paperback – September 30, 1996)

Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for History.

In this study of the fateful encounters between Europe and Asia on the shores of a legendary sea, Neal Ascherson explores the disputed meaning of community, nationhood, history, and culture in a region famous for its dramatic conflicts. What makes the Black Sea cultures distinctive, Ascherson argues, is the way their component parts came together over the millennia to shape unique communities, languages, religions, and trade. As he shows with skill and persuasiveness, Black Sea patterns in the Caucasus, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Turkey, and Greece have linked the peoples of Europe and Asia together for centuries.

In the palace of the Tatar khans at Bakhchiserai – unloved and faded – I caught the glance of a Russian woman in charge of a band of girl students. It was a dark, hot glance; she halted her girls by pulling roughly on their yellow plaits, as if on a train's alarm cord, and came over to talk. 'This morning, I have two thoughts,' she began. 'The first is for my son, who is in Germany: now I shall never see him again. The second is that there is no vodka in the shops, so I have no way to forget what is happening. You are from Britain? May we please export to you some of our big surplus of fascists?'

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Chapter Nine

Sarmatia is an imaginary country – which does not change the fact that it is the fatherland of us all . . .

We live like spies, with a foreign biography in our own country. We enter in a forged register: ‘place of birth, Sarmatia.’ And we are fond of this forgery. A numismatist valuing two old coins will take more interest in the forged one, because it is not just – like the original – a token of value but also a token of aspiration. After a while, the forgery will be more valuable than the original. The scale of values is reversed, and that is why Sarmatia Felix, our fatherland, still lives within us.

Marek Karpiński, ‘Jacek Kaczmarski – Aneks do wniosku o awans’, in *PULS*, Nos 64/5, Sept–Dec 1993

I am back, and I remain as much of a barbarian as my forefathers!

The Squire in Mickiewicz’s *The Confederates of Bar*, who has just returned from a tour of Western Europe

DEBATES ABOUT NATIONALISM tend to revolve around the concept of the nation as ‘imagined community’. The phrase comes from Benedict Anderson’s short and brilliant book of that title, and there is much to be said for it. Early modern nationalism, he argued, arose from an imaginative leap: the assumption by individuals that thousands or millions of people whom they would never meet

p. 230. – **Nationalism – nation, state, language and culture**

shared their particular culture, language and outlook. In the time before mass communications or easy travel, this assumption about solidarity was fostered by what Anderson called ‘the print revolution’, the circulation of printed literature written in the vernacular, but it remained an act of faith.

Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe experienced a widespread ‘invention of nations’. Intellectuals assembled ballads and oral traditions into ‘national literatures’, synthesised standard written languages out of dialects, and composed histories of the nation from chronicles and folk-epics. From every capital city, a legion of Wolfgang Feursteins set out for the villages with notebook and pencil. They worked to a teleology: the belief that a reawakened national community would set out on the journey towards supreme self-realisation as an independent nation-state.

Yet the nation, as imagined or even forged community, is far older than the nation-state. It existed before the political mobilisation made possible by the print revolution. It will, in fresh mutations, exist when the nation-state has passed into history. Indeed, the practice of inventing history to legitimise some aspiring social group is also older than modern Romantic nationalism. John Dee, the Welsh wizard and con-man, seduced Elizabeth I of England with his argument that, as the Tudor descendant of Welsh kings, she had re-established the Celtic realm of Arthur not only over all ‘Britain’ but over the mythical Arthurian empire beyond the ocean: the Americas, announced Dee, were the rightful inheritance of this ‘Great Britain’. But no sleight of history is stranger, or more laced with ironies, than the resurrection of Sarmatia.

At the end of the twentieth century, we think of Poland as a country of the Baltic shore. Polish origins seem to us to lie among proto-Slav farmers, settled along the river Vistula as it flows north to reach the Baltic in the Bay of Gdańsk. But there was a time when Poland looked towards the Black Sea as its native coast, and when Poles claimed ancestry in a race of Indo-Iranian pastoral nomads – the Sarmatians.

In the sixteenth century, Polish writers began to assert that Poles were the descendants of the Sarmatians. At first, this claim did not seem grotesque. It was no more than a Polish response to a European fashion. In the Renaissance, the flattering of dynasties

p. 231. – **Polish Nobility – *szlachta*, “Liberum Veto”**

through genealogies dug out of classical learning had become a literary convention – driven forward, indeed, by the print revolution which made Greek and Roman histories available to courtiers. If Elizabeth of England was the heiress of the pre-Saxon Britons, if the Swedish kings were descendants of the Goths, the French kings sprung from Gaulish loins and the Muscovite tsars (in a particularly weird conceit) related through Rurik to the emperor Augustus,

then it was not too eccentric for the Polish commonwealth to boast of origins in a race of Iranian ‘barbarians’ from the Black Sea.

But then, in the next hundred years, the Sarmatian myth took an extraordinary, freakish twist of its own. From being the official myth of a court, ‘Sarmatism’ became the mass faith of a class.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Polish nobility (*szlachta*) came to believe that it was they – not the Polish population at large – who were the exclusive descendants of the Sarmatians. They were not just a superior caste within Polish society, but a different race. Other classes, like burghers or peasants, must therefore have other, inferior racial origins. Soon, more pseudo-classical borrowing allowed scholars to refer to the lower orders as ‘Getae’ or ‘Gepids’ – lesser tribes of Thracian or Germanic origin, who were imagined to have migrated into east-central Europe as slaves of the noble Sarmatians.

The *szlachta* dominated the old Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. This enormous social group came to number something like 10 per cent of the population. Its members ranged from princely families wealthier than many European kings to muddy-arsed squireens who dug and hoed their own patches of rye. Its obscure origins lay in a clan system, recruited by military allegiance and adoption as much as by hereditary connection: a pattern which resembled traditional society in the Scottish *Gaeltacht* rather than the feudal order of Western Europe.

This ‘Sarmatian Ideology’ had a clear legitimising function. In the commonwealth, or ‘royal republic’, the nobility had achieved almost total ascendancy over the state. They elected the king. They composed the *Sejm* (parliament) and enforced on it the rule of unanimity: the *Liberum Veto*, which allowed a single dissenting voice to block all proceedings. They established, step by step, their own immunity to any central interference with their own limitless privileges. The *szlachta* did not so much rule as prevent anyone from ruling. This gave rise to the curious proverb that ‘*Polska w*

p. 232 – **“Sarmatian Ideology”, Poland’s “geopolitical destiny” (→ eastward”),**
Terra Felix, Reformation and Counter-Reformation”

nierzędem stoi’ – roughly, that Poland is founded upon disorder (the word *nierzęd* also has connotations of prostitution, like the French use of *bordel* to mean chaos or the English legal expression ‘disorderly house’, meaning a brothel). In this view, the *szlachta* alone constituted the true nation, and as Sarmatians its members were entitled to do as they pleased. That was the so-called Golden Freedom for which the *szlachta* repeatedly took up arms.

In the course of the seventeenth century, other elements were added to the ideology. One was xenophobia. Sarmatism was devoutly conservative, a hymn of thanksgiving addressed to the status quo. To the Sarmatian eye, Poland was perfect: Poland was the nobleman's paradise, the bravest, wisest and happiest *Terra Felix* on earth. It seemed to follow that any proposal for change was a threat of pollution by foreign influence. Royal initiatives to raise taxes or reform administration were attacked as the work of German or French advisers, poisoning the mind of the king in order to introduce absolutism and subvert Polish independence. The Reformation, especially for the middle and lower nobility, was perceived as another disruptive import from Bohemia and Germany, embraced by vulgar non-Sarmatians like urban merchants. A fanatical Counter-Reformation Catholicism became a component of Sarmatian patriotism.

Sarmatism also repositioned Poland's sense of geography – or of 'geopolitical destiny'. In spite of their Catholic enthusiasm, the neo-Sarmatians looked eastwards rather than westwards. For the 'descendants' of noble barbarians from the Pontic Steppe, the Black Sea coasts and the plains between the Danube and the Don seemed to be their ancestral home and heritage.

In this way, the Sarmatian idea was used to authenticate an aggressive foreign policy towards the East. The word 'Sarmatia' was restored as a description of all Slav populations and their territories. To the Polish nobility, convinced that they were the chosen race, this implied not only that the *szlachta* was the aristocracy of all Slavdom, but that Poland – in a period of almost continuous war against Russians, Tatars and Turks – had an historical claim to old Sarmatian realms in Russia itself, in the Cossack lands of Ukraine, in Moldavia and Bessarabia.

Sarmatism was also a style. It was a way of life: extravagant and ostentatious, sometimes wildly generous and at other times savagely violent and vengeful, based on rural life in wooden

p. 233. – **Style, way of life – “Noble Democracy”**

manor-houses and on a cult of the healthy, pious environment of the countryside. Hospitality, which mostly meant drinking and hunting, was a particular Sarmatian pride. Arcadia, however pure, could be boring, and some noble families posted small boys in trees to watch for the dust of an approaching carriage, which would then be virtually ambushed and the stranger dragged indoors to be entertained. His attempts to leave, often weeks later, were sometimes frustrated by removing his coach wheels.

The style was also, and famously, about dress and decoration. Here all the ironies of Sarmatism were concentrated. By the early eighteenth century, the Polish-Sarmatian noble was a startling, unmistakable figure. He shaved his skull, cultivated long, drooping moustaches (the Sarmatism of Lech Wałęsa's whiskers did wonders for Solidarity in 1980), and wore a long *kontusz* caftan held in over his paunch by a sash. His sword would be a curved scimitar, its hilt probably encrusted with gold and jewels. In short, he looked like a Turk – or possibly a Turkified Tatar.

Of course, this had nothing to do with what the historical Sarmatians had worn. Reliefs and wall-paintings of the Bosporan Kingdom show the men in trousers and belted tunics, bearded and long-haired. This neo-Sarmatian outfit was actually the clothing of Poland's enemies, the oriental gear of Turk and Tatar warriors appropriated by those who boasted that they were the bastion of Catholic and European Christianity against the pagans. The grandest Sarmatian hero of them all, King John Sobieski, is still honoured as the 'saviour of Christendom'; at the battle of Vienna in 1683, he relieved the siege of the city and inflicted on the Turkish armies a defeat so crushing that the Ottoman Empire never seriously threatened central Europe again. But at that battle the Polish troops looked so much like the enemy that they were obliged to wear a straw cockade, in case their Habsburg allies mistook them for Turks.

Poland today still insists on its 'European', Western allegiance, now based not only on the Catholic faith but on diligently Western institutions and tastes. On the surface, nothing of that orientalising style remains. And yet in subtle ways Poland is a much more oriental culture than Russia. While the Muscovites hid from the Mongols in their northern forests, the Poles were already open to influences from the Black Sea steppes. The Tatar *quriltai*, as I have suggested, helped to inspire the Polish decision to elect kings by a

p. 234. – **"European", Western allegiance, attempted reforms**

mass gathering of mounted nobles. The idea of a 'noble democracy' may have nomad origins, like the cloudy beginnings of the Polish *herby* (clans), and the relationship between Polish rulers and urban colonies of foreign merchants – Germans, Scots, Jews, Armenians – was an echo of the symbiosis of Iranians and Greeks by the Black Sea.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Sarmatism collapsed under the weight of its own stupidity. But in its fall, it also destroyed Poland itself, and the independence for which the nobility had fought so fiercely for so many centuries.

It had been obvious for many years that unless the decaying Commonwealth were reformed and modernised, Poland would disintegrate and be annexed by its neighbours. Russia, under Catherine II, already exercised a *de facto* protectorate over Poland, and a first Partition had taken place in 1772. The last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, was a sophisticated European who sought to build a modern state with a strong central authority; the 1791 'Constitution of the Third of May', composed on the most progressive Enlightenment principles, made the monarchy hereditary, reformed the administration and government, and abolished most of the ancient abuses which had allowed the *szlachta* to retain a stranglehold over change. But it was too late.

It is wrong to say that the nobility, as a class, opposed reform. By 1791, the American and French Revolutions had converted educated Poles to the reform cause, and a large part of the *szlachta*, realising that without radical change the nation was doomed, supported the king. The members of the *Sejm* who voted through the Constitution, abolishing noble privileges, were themselves aristocrats. But the great Sarmatian families remained blindfolded in their own arrogance. It was not Russia but reform, on 'foreign' and 'Jacobin' principles, which seemed to them to threaten the survival of Poland. If the *szlachta* lost its independence, then Polish independence was lost too – for the *szlachta* was the nation.

In 1792, a group of Sarmatian magnates – most of them from eastern Poland, in what is now Ukraine – appealed to Catherine II to intervene. They raised their standard against King Stanisław August in the rebellion known as the 'Confederation of Targowica', and nearly a hundred thousand Russian troops surged across the frontier. There followed the Second Partition; the desperate but unsuccessful rising of 1794 led by Tadeusz Kościuszko; and then

p. 235. – **Partitioning of Poland and 123 years of foreign domination**

the Third Partition which wiped Poland off the map of Europe for 123 years. Sarmatism, in short, achieved precisely what its ultra-conservative patriotism sought to prevent. It allowed foreigners to destroy Poland and abolish Polish independence.

But, to the end of their lives, many of these Targowican barons failed to understand what they had done. They kept their vast estates, travelling now to St Petersburg and Odessa rather than to Warsaw and Kraków. They had lost the political influence they had enjoyed in the old commonwealth, but to be appointed Marshal of Nobility in some Ukrainian county was not a bad substitute. It baffled and appalled them when some of their sons and daughters

took up arms for Polish independence in the nineteenth-century insurrections, often to end up in a forest grave or a Siberian penal colony. But this, no doubt, was further proof that the terrible French germ of Jacobinism was still infectious. Meanwhile, the fact that they themselves were secure and prospering could only mean that all was well with Poland too.

One of those who signed the Confederation of Targowica was Seweryn Rzewuski. He was one of the patriarchs of a great family which was proud of its Targowican connection and which saw no reason for remorse in the years which followed. He was also the grandfather of Karolina Sobańska, born Rzewuska.

In the end, there is only one plausible track towards the mystery of her inmost feelings. This track leads through a hall of mirrors into a chapel with a self-portrait above the altar: the monstrous solipsism of conservative aristocracy. What was good for the Rzewuskis was good for Poland. What diminished the ancient liberties of the Rzewuskis was treachery to the liberty of Poland.

She saw, perhaps with genuine pity, the fate of those she betrayed. They walked Paris pavements, borrowing money to feed their children, or sat all day in Dresden cafés over a cup of coffee, or dug trenches in the Siberian permafrost under the eye of a sentry. They talked all the time about 'Poland', whatever they meant by it. Some of them had been to bed with her. Some of them were honest enough in their way. But they were not 'our sort of people'. The tradition in which she had been brought up taught her that they were another, lower species who shared her country, who might be owed some protection in return for loyal service, but who could not be expected to think as 'we' thought, or to understand what 'we' understood.

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Karolina Sobańska was indeed a sort of patriot, although not in the sense which Mickiewicz hopefully invented for her. She was the last Sarmatian.

(More on Karolina Sobanska and Adam Mickiewicz in Odessa on pages 136 – 176)

HADRIAN WALL – Sarmatians in Europe

The village of Ribchester is in Lancashire, not far from Preston. Broad and shallow, the river Ribble flows round its margin, and on the spring day when I made my visit, there were children paddling in the river around boulders which had once been Roman masonry. Ribchester is built on the site of Bremetennacum Veteranorum, a Roman cavalry fortress on the road north to Hadrian's Wall. Most of its streets cover the native cantonments outside the ramparts, where Brigantian workers and discharged



Hadrian's Wall – HISTORY. *Where Is Hadrian's Wall? Hadrian's Wall is located near the border between modern-day Scotland and England. It runs in an east-west direction, from Wallsend and Newcastle on the River Tyne in the east, traveling about 73 miles west to Bowness-on-Solway on Solway Firth. The wall took at least six years to complete.* Jan 19, 2018

soldiers lived. Under the churchyard is the *principia* headquarters block with its pillared drill-hall for rainy days, and the underground *sacellum*, the strongroom where the regional military command kept its cash.

Here, towards the end of the second century AD, a large force of Sarmatian lancers arrived. They were Iazygians, the vanguard of the slow Sarmatian migration from the Black Sea steppe towards the west, who had crossed the Transylvanian mountains and entered the north-eastern Hungarian plains. From there, they began to raid the Roman frontier on the middle Danube until the emperor Marcus Aurelius led an army across the Danube and defeated them. He had intended, it seems, to have them massacred. But problems elsewhere in the Empire required his attention, and he offered them the option of enlistment instead. The Iazygians accepted, and were drafted to northern Britain. Some 5,500 cavalrymen, presumably accompanied by their horses and families, made the journey across a continent and a sea. They may have served initially on the Wall, where some of their horse-armor has been found, but within a few decades, in the early third century, they had been transferred to Ribchester, a powerful mobile reserve of cavalry watching the Ribble gap and the passes through the Pennines.

But the Sarmatians never went home. The Empire lost control of the plains north of the Danube, which meant that they could not be returned on discharge to found military colonies and form a Romanised cordon on the frontier. Instead, each generation was settled locally as it reached retiring age. For two hundred more years, until the final Roman evacuation of Britain in the fifth century, the descendants of Iranian-speaking nomads continued to

p. 237. – **Sarmatians in Western Lancashire**

multiply and to be found land in the lower Ribble valley, perhaps draining the marshes to provide farmland, possibly directed into horse-breeding. By the time of the first Anglian or Saxon settlement in the region, the Sarmatians must have formed a large and deeply rooted community in western Lancashire.

What happened to them in the end is unknown. Most probably, they lost their military, imperial character and simply merged into the general post-Roman population of Britain. The study of genetic history by the analysis of DNA traces is still a highly inexact science, treated with utmost caution by historians, and biology alone cannot answer the question of ‘who people are’. But if one day it is established that there are distinctive Indo-Iranian genes, a DNA survey in the Preston hinterland might well reveal that the Sarmatians are in a sense still present.

(...)

p. 238. – **Recent facts may be confirming the myth? The *tanga***

The idea that there might be elements of fact in the myth itself – that the Poles and specifically Polish noble families might actually be the descendants of Sarmatian immigrants – has seemed to most modern historians too silly to be worth investigating. But Sarmatism has waited until now to deliver its last and most disconcerting irony. There may be ‘something in it’, after all.

The early history of the Slavs is bound up with the late history of the Sarmatians, and with their gradual arrival in central and Western Europe. The Iazygians, who ended up at Ribchester, were the first Sarmatian people to reach the Roman frontier on the middle Danube. The last group to follow that route was the huge tribal confederation known as the Alans. They were the rearguard of the Indo-Iranian migration into Europe, which had begun with the Scythians some eleven hundred years before. Behind the last Sarmatian groups – the Eastern Alans and the Antae – rode the Huns. They were not Iranians but Turkic-speakers, who reached the Black Sea around 355 AD and inaugurated over a thousand years of Turkic supremacy in the Pontic Steppe.

Early in the third century, a new ruling group, heavily armed and wealthy, entered what is now southern Poland. When they buried their dead, they equipped them with wheel-turned pottery made on the northern Black Sea coasts, Sarmatian brooches and lances with iron heads inlaid in silver. They were unmistakably a Sarmatian people, possibly the Antae, and their material culture showed that they had been in long and close contact with the Bosphoran Kingdom. But the surest evidence for that contact – and the key exhibit in the argument about the Sarmatian ancestry of the Poles – is the *tanga*.

Tamgas are a family of signs. A *tamga* resembles a graffito monogram, a simple Chinese character or even a cattle-brand (*tamgas* were in fact used until recently to mark domestic animals in the northern Caucasus). Each one appears to be individual, to stand alone. Rostovtzeff thought that groups of them formed complete

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texts, 'the first stages in the development of a Sarmatian style of writing', but this is not convincing. Nor are they obviously pictograms based on some represented object, like the broken arrows and crescents and mirrors of Pictish symbol-carvings. In a few, a part of the pattern forms a stylised bird, but that proves neither that the *tamga* began as a bird-picture which was then stylised nor that an abstract design suggested a bird-form to some later *tamga*-engraver. Either sequence could be true.

Nobody knows, in short, what *tamgas* 'mean' or what they were really for. They are first found in the Bosporean Kingdom, dated to the first century AD, inscribed on the walls of underground tombs or on ritual objects. They are evidently not Sarmatian by origin, but at the same time they seem to have something to do with Central Asian religious symbolism of this period. What is clear is that the Sarmatians adopted the *tamga* from the Bosporeans, and that its function then changed. After a fairly short time, the ritual purpose becomes less important, and the *tamga* is increasingly found engraved on the personal possessions of rich and powerful men and women. It becomes a property mark, but whether this refers to individual or clan property is not clear. Almost all known *tamga* signs have been found on Bosporean territory, most of them in the Greek cities.

Tamgas also occur in the Sarmatian graves scattered across Poland, engraved on stone or inlaid in silver upon iron lance-heads. Their spread reaches from Ukraine, including the Kiev region, westwards to what is now Silesia, and the distribution and the dating of the graves makes this look very much like the track of a Sarmatian-Alan migration.

The Polish *tamgas* do not show just that Sarmatians arrived there. They can be read to suggest that the Sarmatians never went away. Long before a Polish archaeologist, the late Tadeusz Sulimirski, made this case, chroniclers and genealogists had noticed that the heraldic clan symbols used by the old Polish nobility looked like *tamgas*. In fact, the older these crests were, the more strikingly 'Sarmatian', or rather Bosporean, they looked. This is not a matter of the great Sarmatism fad which began in the sixteenth century; such crests had been used as the devices of clans like the Roch, Chamiec, Mora or Doliwa in the Middle Ages, long before Sarmatism had been invented. Where, then, had they come from?

At this point, conventional scientists get cold feet. The evidence is

not abundant. Any hypothesis is flossed up out of guesswork: grounds for charges of romanticism, which is a worse academic crime than falsification of data. All the same, a circumstantial case exists. We know that a Sarmatian mounted élite, using the *tamga*, reached Poland in the third century and settled there for at least a hundred years – possibly longer. We know that Polish *szlachta* families came to think that they were the descendants of Sarmatians. Finally, we know that Polish mediaeval heraldry used a graphic language whose only known visual ancestor is the *tamga*. So the problem, it might be said, is merely a thousand-year gap between Sarmatians and *szlachta* about which we know almost nothing. It may be that these broken-off connections at either end of the gap resemble one another only by coincidence. On the other hand, it may be that a class of mounted warriors from the Black Sea steppe – or as we might call them, knights in armour – achieved such a grip over a primitive Slavonic population that they were able to spend a millennium slowly turning themselves into a mediaeval land-holding nobility.

Sulimirski charged at the problem like a lancer. In the Polish edition of his book *The Sarmatians*, he writes of the ‘almost identical forms’ of crests and *tamgas*, and asserts: ‘It would appear that there can be no doubt about the origin of a significant proportion, if not the majority of Polish crests in Sarmatian *tamgas*.’ The Antae, a component group of the Eastern Alans, were not wiped out by the Hun invasion of Poland which took place in the fifth century, and ‘their descendants . . . retained their high social position.’ It must therefore be assumed, says Sulimirski, that ‘a significant part’ of the Polish *szlachta* really does originate with the Sarmatian Alans.

He goes further. Polish aristocratic mores, Sulimirski suggests, find many of their roots in Sarmatian custom. Ancient writers record the solidarity and sense of equality among Sarmatians, much like the *szlachta* motto that ‘the petty squire on his plot /Is as good as the duke’. And might not the special Polish attitude to women have its roots among those Indo-Iranian nomads too? Sarmatian noblewomen were powerful and respected, while the Polish system of aristocratic descent still shows traces of matriliney. ‘Who knows’, Sulimirski defiantly winds up, ‘whether Polish gallantry to women, which amazes foreigners, as does the responsible role of women in family and even social life, is not a survival or echo of Sarmatian matriarchal society?’

p. 241.– **Are Sarmatians' progeny(!) still kissing ladies' hands in POLAND? Ossetians, Alans → “dawn of chivalry” in the West? Heraldry?**

The Sarmatians, even if their progeny are still kissing ladies' hands in Poland and helping mares foal in Lancashire, have emptied themselves into history until none of them – apart from the Ossetians – remain. Those who migrated west from the Black Sea ceased to be nomads and pastoralists. Some of the first wave, like the Iazygians, were recruited by the Roman Empire and resettled in various parts of Gaul or Britain. Others moved north-westward until they came up against the strong and firmly settled Germanic peoples. Late Roman writers, trying to describe this, fell into the habit of describing all Europe east of the Germans as 'Sarmatia', a term which was gradually applied to all the Slav peoples of the region whether or not they had a ruling class of Sarmatian origin.

The Alans, in particular, had many strange fates. One group or war-party, setting out from the Balkans in the late fourth century, rode right across the dying Roman Empire through Austria and the Rhineland, and then, with Vandal and Suevian allies, into France, Spain and Portugal, winding up in what is now Spanish Galicia. Other expeditions moved more slowly across northern France, in some cases putting down roots and forming small Alan kingdoms of their own. Over thirty French place-names, including that of the town of Alençon, allude to their presence, and there is some evidence of a long-lasting Sarmatian settlement near Orléans.

These kingdoms, replacing the shrunken remains of the Roman villa economy, seem to prefigure the mediaeval pattern of mounted knights ruling settled peasantries. For some scholars, the Sarmatians engendered 'the dawn of chivalry' in the West, not only as a new pattern of social order but in mythology, symbolism and taste. Timothy Taylor writes that 'the animal-based heraldry of mediaeval Europe . . . owes far more to this direct steppic influence than to the animal motifs – originally Persian and Thracian – mediated and transmitted by western Celtic art.'

The Eastern Alans had been the neighbours of the Huns in Central Asia, and had acquired some of their customs. One of these was skull-binding, the practice of deforming the heads of infants into an ovoid shape – flat receding forehead and long projecting cranium at the back. Partly overrun by the Hun offensive into Europe, many Eastern Alans joined their armies and travelled west with them. Some settled for a time on the Elbe, and – like their predecessors the Antae – came to mobilise and dominate the larger and less warlike Slavonic populations they found there.

One of these conquests had a powerful impact on later history. The words *Choroatus* and *Chorouatos* (Croat) occur on inscriptions found at Tanais, on the Don. It looks as if the term was originally the name of a group of Alan warriors who lived for a period in the Azov steppes and then migrated again towards the north-west. There they subjugated and then merged into Slavonic peoples living on the upper Vistula and in northern Bohemia. Byzantine and Arab chronicles in the tenth century describe a people called *Belochrobati* (White Croats) in that region, whose kings drank mares' milk and whose babies were subjected to skull-binding. Migrating southwards across the Hungarian plain towards the Adriatic, this group settled in the area which was to become modern Croatia. The name 'Serb', too, originally belonged to another Eastern Alan band which was recorded in the Volga-Don steppe in the third century and which reappeared in the fifth century on the east bank of the Elbe. In the same way as the Sarmatian 'Croats', they dominated and then melted into Slav populations around them. Some remained there, ancestors of the Slav-speaking Serb minority which still lives in Lusatia in modern Saxony. Others, like the Croats, moved south across the Danube to a permanent home in the Balkans: the future land of Serbia.

Fragments of Alan population survived in Asia for many more centuries. William of Rubruck, in the thirteenth century, was only one of several European travellers who met Christianised Alans living at the court of Tatar khans, and Marco Polo heard of similar communities in China during the Yuan/Mongol dynasty. In the fourteenth century, the missionary bishop Brother Pellegrini reported a large community of Orthodox Christian Alans, possibly mercenary soldiers, living on the south-eastern coast of China, but nothing else is known about them.

The Crimean coast between Feodosia and Alushta was still known as 'Alania' in the Middle Ages, and there were disputes about who was the rightful bishop of the Alans. These last Sarmatians on the Black Sea appear to have linked up with the Crimean Goths until 'Gothia' was overthrown by the Turks and Tatars. The final mention of the Alans, as inhabitants of Crimea in the time of the Tatar khanate, dates from the seventeenth century – only a hundred years before the Russian conquest.

Although their overlords were Moslems, the Crimean Alans remained Orthodox Christians and their faith was tolerated. By 1600, they had become a small, inoffensive community which had grown almost indistinguishable from more recent Christian settlers along the Crimean coast – indistinguishable, except for one thing. Their heads were egg-shaped. More than a thousand years since they learned the practice from the Huns, the Eastern Alans were still binding the skulls of their babies.

