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A Review of the Scythian Empire: Central Eurasia and the Birth of the Classical Age from Persia to China

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Abstract

The Scythian Empire is a controversial book with a charming title that can attract the attention of any scholar. Christopher I. Beckwith presents claims in this book that accepting each one of them leads us to rethink many previous customary historical beliefs. Some of his theories are novel but most of them are rehabilitation of older obsolete ideas. The book wraps a wide range of specialized topics in the fields of history, archeology, and linguistics; but deals with most of them on a superficial level. Since the Scythians were an Iranian ethnic group, this work is especially recommended for scholars of Iranian history, as unfortunately, the significance of the Scythians in shaping Iranian history has not been recognized as other ancient Iranians such as the Persians. In a broader sense, this work can be also useful for scholars interested in the Iranian world and its relations with neighboring civilizations, Eurasia, Central Asia, and China.

Keywords: Iran; China; Eurasia; The Scythians; The Persian Empire.

Introduction

In the preface, the author mentions the reasons behind the anonymity of the Scythians in historical studies, and why many deny the existence of a Scythian Empire; however, Beckwith himself despite many efforts, fails to prove the existence of such an Empire.

Terminology: One of the advantages of the book is the explanation of the exact meaning of some misleading and frequent terms. By defining the exact meaning of terms such as Eurasia, The Silk Road, Media, Central Eurasia, Central Asia, and Early Zoroastrianism along with the two useful and regular terms of Iranian and Iranic in the Transcriptions & Conventions part, the author succeeds in preventing many misconceptions. However, some other terms also needed to be defined, like the word Empire, which appears in the title of the book, and the author's primary purpose is to prove the existence of the Scythian Empire. Feudalism is another term that would be better if the author defined it. Throughout the book, it is repeatedly emphasized that the political system of the Scythians, Medians, and Achaemenian Persians was feudalism, a feudalism that was certainly different from that of Medieval Europe; therefore, a clear definition of the features of this feudal system could have been beneficial.

Transcriptions & Conventions: This section is mostly dedicated to linguistic matters. The authors' expressions about the complexity of writing Chinese words with the Latin alphabet and the complexity surrounding its phonetic system are particularly useful for those unfamiliar with this language.

Introduction: The introduction briefly describes the book's many claims which are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections. At the advent of this section, the author refers to the contradictions in Herodotus' reports regarding the Scythians and that this could have been a result of later alternations by those who transmitted Herodotus' work. This is significant, as many of Beckwith's claims highly rely on Herodotus. Sadly, the book lacks a detailed examination of Herodotus' historiography and the author accepts his accounts only when they are in line with his theories.

Prologue: The author refers to some innovations and developments at the commencement of the Classical Age and then raises this pivotal question that is it a coincidence that all of those developments took place almost with the appearance of the Scythians in historical records? The author's answer to the question is negative; however, there is a fundamental problem with the question: The Scythians are not the only people who appear in the speaking period. The names of the Persians and Medes also pass into the historical records almost at the same time; hence, following Beckwith, one could easily ask if it is a coincidence that the developments of the Classical Age happened with the arrival of the Persians or Medes in history. Returning to Beckwith's question, he attributes almost all of the innovations of the Classical Age to the Scythians. These innovations are new advanced weapons, a feudal hierarchal sociopolitical system, a
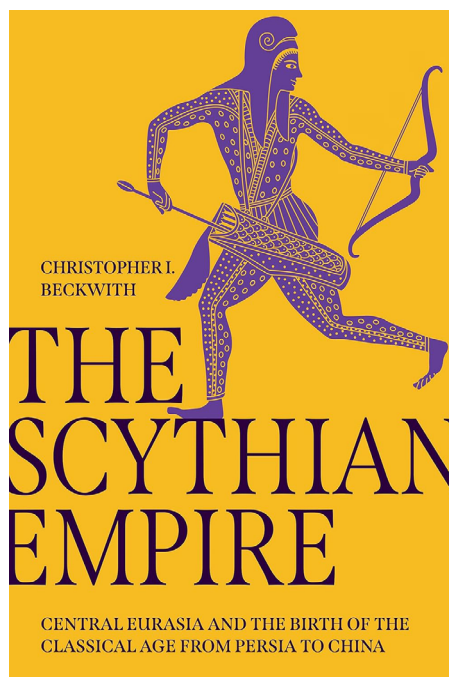
new religious philosophy, one eternal royal line, functional reorganization of the army, a new type of fitted clothing, and a new language.

Chapter I: The Scythians in the Central Eurasian Steppes. This chapter holds a critical claim, and that is the royal house among the Scythians was called Ariya and this term meant royal or having the legitimacy to rule. Accordingly, Beckwith claims that the royal Scythian language was also called Ariya. The base of this theory lies in the meaning of the word Ariya and Beckwith proposes his definition of it by comparing the oldest Chinese and Iranian texts; however, his method suffers from significant drawbacks. He compares the Behistun and Ratabak inscriptions in this regard without considering the chronological gap, along with the geographical distance between these inscriptions. Moreover, since both inscriptions are written in an Iranian language (one Old Persian and the other Bactrian) the epiphany Ariya could have meant Iranian. Beckwith also ignores Darius' statements about his national and ethnic identity: "I am (…) a Persian, son of

CHRISTOPHER I. BECKWITH

THE SCYTHIAN EMPIRE

CENTRAL EURASIA AND THE BIRTH OF THE CLASSICAL AGE FROM PERSIA TO CHINA

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Persian, an Aryan having Aryan lineage" (DNa, §14-2.13). Since the term Persian here has an ethnical meaning, Aryan should have been also the same. This statement also rejects Beckwith's opinion about the Scythian origin of Darius' ancestors. Beckwith also ignores the fact that in two Achaemenian inscriptions, DNa and DSe, Darius has clearly distinguished between the Iranian and non-Iranian peoples. This indicates that he was aware of his ethno-lingual links to other Iranians. But perhaps the most important flaw of Beckwith's theory is its silence about Airyanəm Vaēja the legendary homeland of the Aryans and its ignorance of the fact that according to the Avesta Zoroaster was not of any royal (Scythian) family, and belonged to the Zoatar class which was a kind of priesthood in the Avestan society (Boyce, 1975: 183). Therefore, the Avestan evidence also disapproves of Beckwith's argument.

Chapter II: The Scythians in Media and Central Asia. At the beginning of this chapter, the author offers significant descriptions of the Cimmerians and their relation-

ship with the Scythians. He concludes that the Scythians and Cimmerians shared a common culture but carried different political bodies. The author also points out the migration route of the Scythians, indicating that just like the Turks and Mongols of later periods, they originated from the Tuva region and western Mongolia. The author's opinion about the fact that the Scythian raids into the heart of the Middle East led to the introduction of monotheism to the Jews is extremely doubtful, as there is no evidence indicating that the Scythians themselves were monotheists. It is quite strange that Beckwith's main source for Scythians' monotheism is Herodotus, while this historian explicitly attests to the several gods worshipped by the Scythians (Herodotus, IV, 59). Moreover, Beckwith's emphasis on the text of Jeremiah in this regard has a fundamental flaw. Although the story of Jeremiah takes place in the pre-Achaemenian period, its text was compiled years later in the Achaemenian or Hellenistic period (Ridling, 1989: 1487). Therefore, it is not possible to speak with certainty about the influence of the Scythians on the Jews.

Beckwith also argues about the role of the Scythians in the formation of the Median Empire, an empire which many scholars have doubts about its existence (see in particular Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1988: 197-212), though Beckwith considers it inevitable without sufficient explanation. His main claim is that during the Scythian rule, the Medes were heavily influenced by the Scythian culture, religion, and language, and he even goes as far as to assume a Scythian ancestry for kings such as Cyaxares and Phraortes. The Scythians certainly played an important role in the history of Media, but given the scarcity of the current historical data, it is not possible to say for sure how much the Scythians influenced the Medes. We can speak about this issue with certainty only when there is sufficient information about the culture of the Medes before the rule of the Scythians, as well as the culture of the Scythians themselves before ruling Media. Since both the Scythians and Medes were Iranian, it may be that there was not much difference between them from the beginning (especially in areas such as religion and language), or perhaps it was the Scythians who were influenced by the Medes.

Among Beckwith's theories, his reconstruction of the history of the Median and Achaemenian empires is the most problematic. According to him, either former empires were successors of the steppe Scythian Empire, or to put it in his words, they were Scythian Empires. Accordingly, Beckwith's argument regarding the religion of the Scythian, Median, and Achaemenian kings is not convincing. Commencing with the religion of the steppe Scythians, Beckwith relies much on Herodotus' accounts of the royal Scythians, their sky god, and the Scythian national foundation myths. He considers the steppe Scythians monotheists, while this is not even in line with Herodotus's description of the Scythians' religion. Moreover, based on the first version of the Scythian national foundation myth, Beckwith concludes that like the Scythians, the Medes (Scytho-Medes in his words), and the Achaemenian rulers also took their legitimacy from being a descendant of the great sky god. This is in sharp contrast to the Behistun inscription where Darius introduces himself merely as an advocate follower of Ahuramazda. Beck-

with even argues that kings such as Cyaxares and Astyages were monotheists following the Scythians, but Cyrus the Great and Cambyses were polytheists and breakers of the monotheistic tradition. Subsequently, Beckwith presents a completely religious interpretation of the Behistun inscription. To his eyes, the whole conflict between Darius the Great and Gaumata revolves around a religious difference; the former was a monotheist, and the later, like Cyrus the Great and Cambyses, was a polytheist. However, this theory has important drawbacks. The most important flaw is that Beckwith only relies on the Behistun inscription, while the study of other documents and evidence, including the Elamite tablets of Persepolis, and Babylonian and Egyptian documents, show how similar the religious policy of Darius was to that of Cyrus and Cambyses. Therefore, the idea that Darius had a religious policy or even a different religion from that of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses is not certain. An important part of this chapter is also dedicated to the military innovations of the Scythians, which seem to be correct given the concordance of the Chinese and Greek sources in this regard.

Chapter III: The Scytho-Mede-Persian Empire. This chapter commences with a statement from Vogelsang, which attributes the base of the Persian Achaemenian Empire to the Median Empire. While this is consistent with current historical data, Beckwith goes further and claims that the Achaemenian Empire was based entirely on the Scythian and Scytho-Mede empires. He claims that neither Cyaxares, Cyrus the Great, nor Darius started a new dynasty; rather they all descended from the Aryan clan of the Scythians and considered themselves to be of a single dynasty. In this way, Beckwith simultaneously rejects the views of those who deny the existence of the Median Empire or consider Cyrus the founder of the Teispids and Darius the Achaemenian line (for a detailed discussion see Rollinger, 2014: 187-206). Unfortunately, Beckwith does not explain further why the previous theories are wrong and merely presents his own opinion. According to Beckwith, the Median and Achaemenian Empires were both based on the steppe Scythian Empire, and rulers such as Cyaxares, Darius the Great, and Xerxes sought to unify the empire around the worship of one single god. Here, the author again mistakenly depicts Cyrus the Great and Cambyses as polytheistic kings who did not understand the significance of worshiping one God for the unification of the empire. Beckwith's opinion stems from this false assumption that the regimes of Cyaxares, Darius I, and Xeroxes I, were based on recognizing a single god and one king, while the Achaemenian Empire was based on one king and many gods. Neither Darius, nor any other Achaemenian or Median king ever imposed the worship of one God on their subjects, and this is precisely why the Persian Empire was so efficient. Hence, Beckwith has based his claims on a series of historical errors. For example, his argument about the enmity of Darius and Xerxes with gods such as Anahita and Mithra is wrong, and the concurrency of Zoroaster and Cyaxares is highly doubtful.

Chapter IV: One Eternal Royal Line. The primary focus of this chapter is the dynastic connection of the Achaemenians to Ariya, the Scythian royal family. The author

assumes that Cyrus the Great was not very interested in the eastern regions of his empire, which it was mostly inhabited by the Scythians. Meanwhile, according to Herodotus, after the conquest of Lydia, Cyrus commended the duty of conquering the rest of Anatolia to his general Harpagus, and then in person led a campaign in the east, which unfortunately Herodotus does not provide details about it (Herodotus, I, 177). On the other hand, both Herodotus and Ctesias report that Cyrus' last battle occurred in the east of his empire. Some ancient authors even mentioned the name of a city called Cyropolis built by Cyrus himself in the most remote eastern parts of the Persian Empire (Strabo, 11.11.4; Arrian 4.2.2; 3, 14). These testimonies indicate that Cyrus was not disinterested in the eastern regions; rather we have less information about his activities in these areas. Furthermore, Beckwith's claim that Cyrus' reason for not mentioning Achaemenes in his famous cylinder could have been due to his ancestor's monotheism is absurd, as neither Cyrus' polytheism nor Achaemenes' monotheism is certain. To prove that Achaemenes was a monotheist, Beckwith presents a doubtful etymology of his name, and after attributing him to the Scythians, he argues that since according to Herodotus, the Scythians worshipped one God, then Achaemenes who had a Scythian name, must have been a Scythian and monotheist.

In the subsection of "the Royal Scythian Lineage in Eastern Eurasia", Beckwith investigates the history of the meaning and concept of the word Ariya in Chinese sources. This part has two important results; firstly, the author shows that Ḣarya was the original form of the word Aria, and secondly, since the Chinese used this name for themselves, it did not mean Iranian.

Chapter V: Imperial Scythian in the Persian Empire. In this chapter, the author seeks to trace the Scythian language in the Achaemenian Empire and after providing an introduction, he defines essential words such as language, dialect, and accent. Beckwith has a pragmatic approach to explaining these concepts and uses simple modern examples. Regarding ancient Iranian languages, Beckwith rejects the idea that the Avestan language was dead at the time of Middle Iranian languages and seeks to identify the identity of the people who spoke the so-called Avestan language. Beckwith also argues that the relationship of the Old Persian language with the Median, Avestan, and Scythian languages was similar to the relationship of the German language with different dialects of English, meaning although they were from the same family, they were different languages. Likewise, he infers the relationship between the Median, Scythian, and Young Avestan languages with each other, like the Australian, British, and American English dialects with each other. Beckwith's effort to highlight the similarities between the Median, Scythian, and Young Avestan languages is admirable and should be taken seriously. However, the historical results presented by Beckwith are dubious. For instance, the idea that the oral language of the Achaemenian Empire was royal Scythian seems improbable, or to put it in better words, it is not confirmed by the current historical data.

Chapter VI: Classical Scythian in the Central Eurasian Steppes. This chapter investigates the language of the Classical period steppe Scythians. Beckwith especially probes into terms that are frequently attested in the Achaemenian royal inscriptions, and Table 7 presents these words. Some of these terms are not even attested on Avestan and are identified as Scythian based on other evidence, including the Scythian inscriptions in the north of the Black Sea. These words are extremely significant and are mostly related to the political and administrative affairs of the Achaemenians.

In this chapter, the Scythian dialects are also discussed, and by examining some words, Beckwith shows their commonality in Eastern and Western Scythian dialects. In the subsection of "The Scythian Dialects", Beckwith employs Chinese, Greek, Turkish, and Tibetan sources to identify Eastern and Western Scythian dialects. The author especially deals with the depalatization of the word Ḣarya in the Chinese, Tibetan, and Togon languages. More interestingly, Beckwith also identifies some Scythian words in ancient and middle Turkic languages.

Chapter VII: The Scythian Empire in Chao and the First Chinese Empire. This chapter begins with the important Lang-yeh inscription, which mentions the land of great Ḣarya. In this chapter, the author shows how the Scythians influenced Chinese history by ruling over the Chao territory. He also points out, following researchers such as Miyazaki (1977-1978), the influence of the Seleucids and Achaemenians on the first emperor of China, Chaocheng.

Chapter VIII: The Scythian Capitals of Media, Chao, and Ch'in. The author first deals with Herodotus' report about the city of Hagmatāna and considering that this name is repeated for some cities in China, he concludes that Hagmatāna was a Scythian name. After Hagmatāna, he goes to the cities of Hǎndān and Hsien-yang and shows how the origin of the name of these cities goes back to Hagmatāna. After Hagmatāna, an interesting discussion begins about the city of Saraɣ, and Beckwith uses Sogdian sources to prove the Scythian origin of its name.

Chapter IX: Scythian Philosophy and the Classical Age. At the beginning of this chapter, a controversial question is raised: was philosophy also invented by the Scythians? The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, the author shows that each of the Persians, Greeks, and Indians first had a Scythian philosopher, and in the second part, he discusses why philosophy appeared almost simultaneously in many countries. What Beckwith puts forward about Anacharsis makes sense; however, the historicity of Anacharsis is doubtful. In the case of Zoroaster, although he may have been a Scythian, the reasons given by the author for his late date and his country are insufficient. One of the strangest arguments of Beckwith is his assertion about the meaning and origin of the name Zoroaster. He rejects the meaning of "decrepit camels" just because it does not seem suitable for a great person like Zoroaster! and instead suggests the Semitic etymology of "the son of the star". Beckwith's proposal

is more consistent with the place and date he suggests for Zoroaster, but names like decrepit camels are more consistent with the society we know from the Scythians, as the name of the first Scythian king recorded in history, Spakaya, also means dog. Regarding Buddha and Laotzu, Beckwith first attributes them to the Scythians by using the etymology of their names. His argument for Laotzu's inspiration from Buddha is plausible; however, there is disagreement as to whether Laotzu was the first Chinese philosopher. The author also tries to restore the Scythian philosophy in the steppe regions by using the teachings of the four mentioned philosophers. However, such a procedure cannot be very accurate, as it cannot be ignored that they were influenced by the environment and the people around them.

In the second part, Beckwith first argues that the developments that occurred in Iran, China, India, and Greece almost simultaneously could not have been a coincidence. He rejects the theories of Jaspers, and his later supporters such as Eisenstadt (1986), Arnason (2005), Bellah & Joas (2012), and instead suggests that the mentioned developments took place under the influence of the Scythians and emphasizes that the Scythians could only have such effect through mastery. It is remarkable that Beckwith, unlike many European and American scholars, doubts the central role of Greece in the innovations of the Classical Age; however, his emphasis that the Scythians were the main source of those developments needs more investigation. Moreover, the influence of the Scythians could not necessarily be due to domination, and even, on the contrary, they could be influenced by their subordinates. This happened much later to the Turks and Mongols, who were greatly influenced by the people who ruled them.

Zoroaster and Monotheism: Appendix A. this section is mostly a repetition of some of the author's previous comments about Zoroastrianism and linguistic issues. Beckwith also suggests, pursuing Skiaervø that Zoroaster's language was probably Younger Avestan, but he composed the Gāthās in Old Avestan. Following some new scholars, Beckwith also rejects the opinion that the Iranian and Indian languages were descendants of an older language in the time of Zoroaster and instead considers them as one language that transformed into two distinct languages due to later developments.

Scythian and Scytho-Mede Dress and Weaponry: Appendix B. this section begins with a criticism of Ctesias' narrative about the legend of Samiramis' dress. The author makes good use of Classical sources as well as the reliefs of Persepolis along with a history of art to highlight the similarity of the clothes and weapons of the Medes to the Scythians.

Conclusion: The book fails to prove the existence of any Scythian Empire and considering the innovations that Beckwith attributes to the Scythians, only three of them, new advanced weapons, functional reorganization of the army, and a new type of fitted clothing seem credible. Beckwith's Achilles' heel is his representation of the Achaemenian history as his deductions about the first Persian Empire are based on a

misinterpretation of simply a few Achaemenian royal inscriptions and ignore much of the remaining evidence from that empire. The political and administrative system of the Achaemenian Empire was not at all similar to that of the Medes or the steppe Scythians, described by Beckwith as a "loos-reined government structure". Similarly, Beckwith's argument about the religion of the Achaemenians and their religious policy, along with the theory of the unification of the empire by highlighting one God, is against many historical documents. Sadly, the book's primary focus on the developments of the Classical Age has led the author to overlook the vital role of the Scythians in shaping Iranian history during the Arsacid rule. After all, the Parthians were originally Scythians but Beckwith ignores them probably because they were not responsible for the innovations of the Classical Age. Despite these defects, Beckwith has succeeded in reminding the significance of the Scythians and forcing historians to take them more seriously. Especially the discussions that Beckwith raises about the Scythian weapons, clothes, and warfare tactics are invaluable and these characteristics are something to be expected from a warrior-type people. In the end, it should be noted that much of what Beckwith argues about the Scythians, especially about their language, could be true; but for now, the extant historical data does not confirm them. Perhaps in the future with more developments in the field of Iranian languages and more archeological discoveries, many of Beckwith's claims came to be accurate.

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