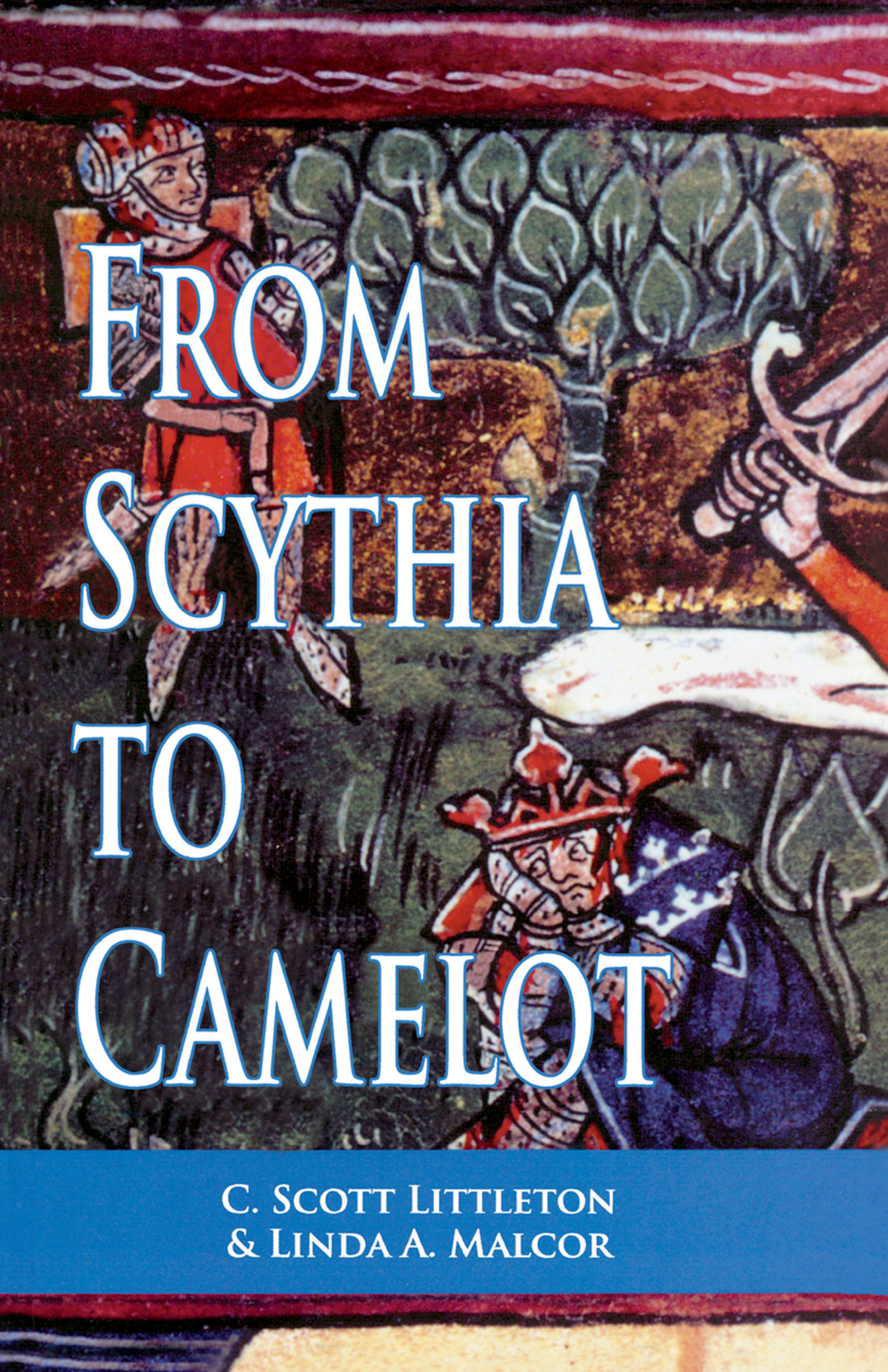

C. SCOTT LITTLETON
& LINDA A. MALCOR

FROM SCYTHIA TO CAMELOT

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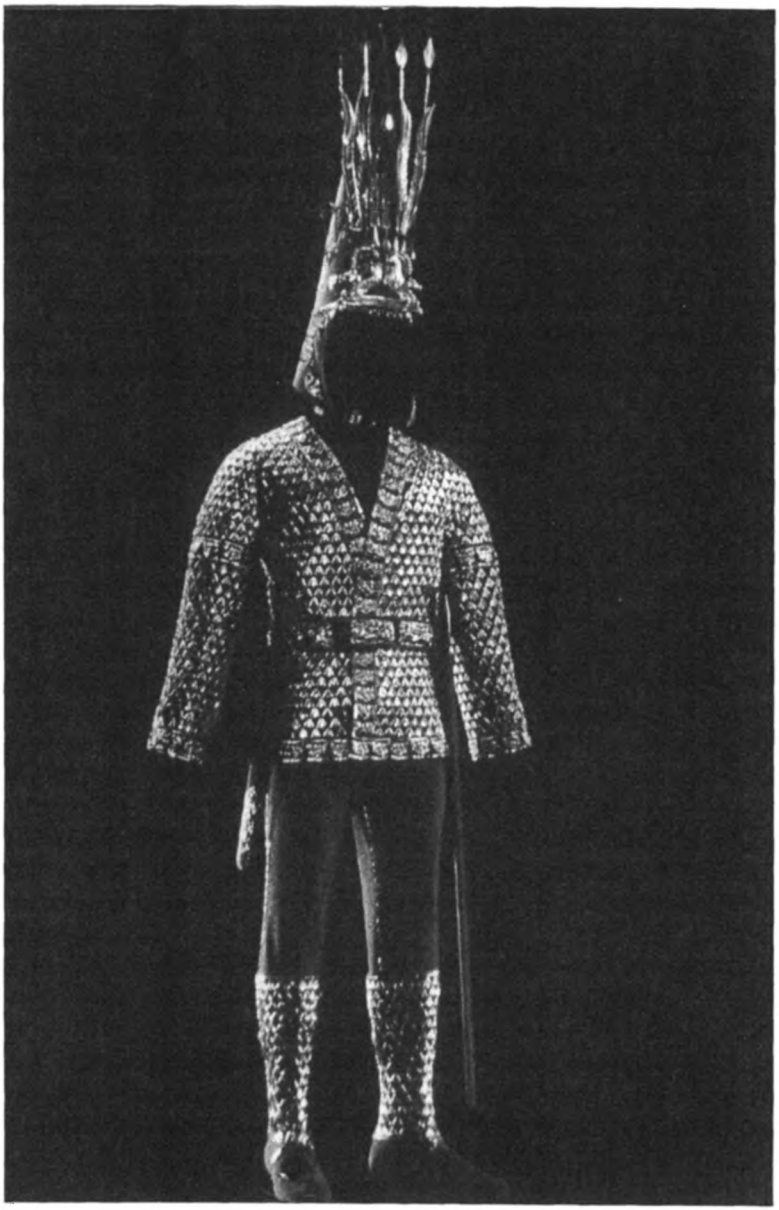

The Golden Man of Issyk. Courtesy of the Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography, Alma-ata, Kazakhstan.

FROM SCYTHIA TO CAMELOT

A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the Holy Grail

C. Scott Littleton
Linda A. Malcor

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To the Memory
of Georges Dumézil

"Thus the Halani [the Alans] . . .
are divided between the two parts
of the earth [Europe and Asia]."

Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2,17
(Rolfe 1939:391)

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Foreword

Few people have not heard of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, and fewer still can read any of the multitude of forms that this myth has taken without some evocation of deep moral, historical, or dramatic sensibility. For the West, and by extension much of the world, the Arthurian cycle has had one of the greatest influences on modern culture of any epic or myth. No one writes plays or musicals based on the *Ṛg Veda*, on the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, on *Beowulf*, or, with the exception of Wagner, on the Norse tales, and yet rewritings of Arthurian material are part of current literature, and popular literature at that, while the musical *Camelot* was enormously popular two decades ago and directors still produce films about Arthur. Not only are the trappings, manners, and fantasies of the Arthurian cycle familiar to most readers, but the values and mores depicted therein, specifically in the "canonical" form as first presented in the fifteenth century by Sir Thomas Malory as a romantic vision of the Middle Ages, need little explanation. There is little in Camelot and its citizens that seems alien or inexplicable, little that needs academic explication in order to understand what is transpiring and why, whereas a reader can often be baffled by the motives or actions of such heroes as Sigurd (Siegfried) or Beowulf, or even Achilles or Agamemnon, not to mention those of the yet more remote Indra or Vishnu of the *Ṛg Veda*, all of whom often require a learned insight to make them even tentatively comprehensible. Arthur and his knights, as the romantic embodiment of chivalry, are close to the modern West, so much so that we may read learned studies of their origins or development with some equanimity, but we are hardly prepared to entertain a remote and exotic origin for figures so familiar as these.

The present book does precisely that: it seeks Arthur's origins in an all but vanished civilization and in doing so resurrects intimate aspects of that lost world and forces us to examine a remote and neglected region of Europe, the Caucasus. This pioneering effort will engender controversy in academic circles concerned with the Arthurian cycle as well as challenge our own historical sense of the origins of much of Western culture. It will force, perhaps gradually because of the resistance of orthodoxy, a restructuring of the field of Arthurian scholarship and will force those concerned to come to terms not only with the lost Iranian civilization of the Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans, but also with the vivid lore of their surviving descendants, the Ossetians of the Caucasus.

Littleton and Malcor have done three important things. First, they have attained a degree of detachment regarding the Arthurian cycle that has enabled them to suggest new origins for many of the important figures and themes of the tradition, if not for the whole tradition, and thus to offer new solutions to long-standing problems of Arthurian scholarship. Arthur and his knights can be traced back beyond Malory to such writers as Wace and Layamon, and beyond them still to anonymous fragments written in Old Welsh. Many figures are transparently Celtic, such as Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, whose name means "Glorious Head of the Troops" in Welsh, or the Celtic Aphrodite figure, Queen Guinevere (Irish Finnabair, from Old Irish Findabair; Welsh Gwenhwyfar), whose name in Irish means "Born on the White," much as the Greek name Aphrodite means "Born on the Foam," and whose Welsh variant means "White Phantom." Other figures, however, such as that of Arthur himself or of Lancelot, have enigmatic origins and have been the objects of enormous scholarly effort, much of it inconclusive. This divergence in names is a symptom of one of the central problems of Arthurian scholarship—that the Arthurian cycle is seen to have arisen from the Celtic cultures of Britain and France (Armorica), indeed to have been the last great bequest of medieval Celtic culture to world civilization, but nevertheless to have an overall aspect and to contain numerous details none of which appear to be Celtic. Its origins, therefore, are a conundrum, with this apparently seamless tradition revealing

itself upon closer scrutiny to be an amalgam of Celtic lore with something else.

Following the earlier work of such scholars as Georges Dumézil, Bernard S. Bachrach, and Helmut Nickel, Littleton and Malcor have sought this unknown "something else" in the culture of the Sarmatians, specifically of the Iazyges tribe, and of their kinsmen the Alans.

At this point the reader can be forgiven for asking, "Culture of who?" In this matter even the specialist must continually exercise imagination in order to keep in mind a realistic image of these vanished peoples. The Scythians of early Classical Antiquity, the Sarmatians, and the Alans of late classical times were nomads of the steppes of Central Asia, extending in their heyday from the plains of what is now Hungary to those of western China, perhaps as far as present-day Kansu, nearly in the center of China. As far as we can determine from contemporary accounts, archaeological findings, and consideration of scanty linguistic remains, these peoples were of European appearance (often blond and blue-eyed), left behind enormous hordes of animal-style art (much of it golden), entombed their chieftains in burial mounds (the ultimate origin of the pagoda by way of the Buddhist stupa), and spoke Iranian languages. While their culture was shaped by its underlying nomad economy, many of its aspects had parallels among the more familiar ones of European antiquity, thus setting them apart from the later nomads of Hunnish, Turkic, and Mongol origin and placing them closer to the Europeans of antiquity. Furthermore, they seem to have shown little similarity with the Iranians of present-day Iran. The latter appear to have undergone a cultural specialization early on, so that even in ancient times the Medes and Persians may have viewed the steppe Iranians as alien.

In a larger context all the Iranians are related to the Indo-Aryans that came to reside in India, bequeathing world civilization the *Ṛg Veda* among other things. In a still larger context these Indo-Iranians were in turn part of the Indo-European family of languages and cultures, encompassing the ancestors of the Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Baltic, Slavic, Greek, Armenian, Albanian, and other, more obscure, peoples and found from Ireland to China and from Scandinavia to India. This

prehistoric people, the Proto–Indo-Europeans, retrieved from the obliteration of time by diligent linguistic comparison, has been the abused vehicle for racists from the early nineteenth century through the Nazis down to today. Nevertheless, a dispassionate assessment of them, as scholarship delineates their language and culture, cannot but rank them among the most fascinating intellectual discoveries of all time and see in their existence a deep, if remote, historical unity of many of the peoples of Eurasia.

One trend in modern scholarship is to locate the Indo-European homeland in the northwest Caucasus, among the "Kurgan" (burial mound) culture, at a time depth of three to five thousand years B.C.E. Clearly the vast spread of the Indo-Europeans through the millennia was aided by, if not solely due to, their conjectured nomadism. As they spread out from the steppes north of the Caucasus, they encountered non–Indo-European sedentary cultures and blended with them to create the peoples of attested European and western Asian history. What is most interesting about the steppe Iranians is that this was the one Indo-European people whose culture underwent an evolution that was primarily internal, in that it remained nomadic and did not blend with some major sedentary civilization. In this sense then, the steppe Iranians, as depicted during the classical period, continued ancient Indo-European civilization in a direct way. This fact in itself makes the steppe Iranians interesting for understanding the history of much of Eurasia. And, it makes their loss all the more regrettable.

By the close of the classical period these steppe Iranians had been pushed to the peripheries of their nomad homeland by the Altaic-speaking (non–Indo-European) Huns and their kinsmen the Turks. Some fled into what is now Tajikistan, Afghanistan, eastern Iran (Sistan), and western India. Others went into the Roman Empire, at times causing parts of it to dissolve while in other parts helping to maintain it against others by becoming mercenaries of the Caesars. They are known to have migrated to Britain (the Iazyge Sarmatians), Italy, France, Spain, and North Africa (the last three areas having largely Alanic contingents). Others fled into Poland, European Russia, and the Caucasus. The standing assumption is that, apart from

tantalizing traces as laid out by Bachrach and Nickel, these peoples vanished without a trace. This assumption is difficult to challenge for two reasons. First, those undergoing the obliteration no longer have representatives to step forward and speak for themselves. Second, the civilization in question is so exotic and so far removed from our contemporary view of Eurasia, that it tends to have an insubstantial quality even in the mind of the most dedicated scholar and therefore lends itself to obscurity.

This assumption cannot be right, however, as a little thought shows: European armies enter the Middle Ages looking like those of the late Roman Empire and come out of this period wearing chain mail and jousting. One must turn to engraved scenes found in Iranian burial hordes that antedate the Middle Ages by a thousand years and are removed from Europe by several thousand kilometers in order to see warriors dressed this way and fighting this way. In other words, the Europeans enter the Middle Ages looking like Romans and emerge from them looking like Sarmatian or Alanic warriors. Clearly the steppe Iranians had an enormous influence on Europe. Clearly, they are much closer to us than we are accustomed to thinking, so close that they are hard to see.

The Iranians who fled into Poland and Russia survive only as a vague tradition among the aristocracies of those nations and perhaps in the names "Russia" and "Belarus" themselves, which may reflect earlier **rukhsh*—(with the Middle Iranian shift of *khsh* to *ss*), as in Roxalani (an Alanic tribe) and *Roxanne* (the Alanic wife of Alexander the Great), meaning "white" or "northern." A sense reinforced by the *bela*—"white" part of "Belarus." There is one place, however, where the Alans persist down to the modern day (without an obscuring overlay of first Zoroastrianism and later Islam, as is the case in the Pamirs of Tajikistan and in Afghanistan), and that is in the Caucasus. This time the reader can be forgiven for asking, "Where?"

The Caucasus Mountains lie between the Black and Caspian seas, in what is now southern Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. They are the tallest mountains in Europe, with fifty-six ethnic groups in an area the size of Spain, fully thirty-six of which are indigenous to this remote and beautiful region. The

center of the North Caucasus was the one place into which the Alans retreated and in which they retained their identity down to the time of Chingis Khan. Until the thirteenth century the North Caucasus had a region or nation called Alania, first part of the Khazar Empire and later a kingdom or empire in its own right. At first these Alans, like their neighbors the Circassians, Chechens, and Daghestanis (indigenous Caucasian peoples), successfully resisted the Mongol onslaught, saving eastern Europe in the process, but under subsequent attack they were pushed higher into the mountains and disappeared as a political entity. They shortly emerged again in the late thirteenth century as the "Ossetes" or "Ossetians," having at this time pulled up into the highlands of the center of the Caucasus chain and spilled down the southern slope of the Caucasian massif into what is now the Republic of Georgia. They were incorporated into the tsarist empire in 1774 as a protectorate. They were divided into North and South administrative units during the late nineteenth century, and this was continued under Communist rule by the creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region as part of the Georgian SSR in 1922 and the North Ossetian Autonomous Region as part of the Russian RSFSR in 1924 and upgraded to an Autonomous Republic in 1936.

Today this fascinating people, perhaps totaling half a million souls and still preserving its Iranian language, is split between the Russian Federation and the Georgian Republic. When Georgia left the USSR in late 1990, it took with it South Ossetia, which promptly declared its intention to unite with North Ossetia and thereby join the Russian Federation. This was seen by Georgia as a provocation and in early 1991 the Georgian-Ossetian war erupted in South Ossetia. This small but savage conflict continued into 1992, stopping only when a ceasefire was mediated and guaranteed by the Russians. Since 1992 the peace in South Ossetia has been maintained by Russian forces. South Ossetia has held a referendum and overwhelmingly chosen to join North Ossetia. North Ossetia has endorsed this intention to unite and thereby bring all of Ossetia into the Russian Federation. Russia, fearful both of offending Georgia and of alienating the Ossetians, has refrained from any political response. As if matters were not bad enough, in late 1992 North

Ossetia and neighboring Ingushetia (a politically distinct unit of the indigenous Caucasian Chechen peoples) indulged in a brief but bitter bloodbath over a disputed region (Prigorodny), so that the present-day Alans face serious threats from two adversaries. This violence also resulted in Russian peacekeepers being brought in.

The position of the Ossetians in the Caucasus is strategically crucial; their capital, Dzaujikau, was renamed Vladikavkaz ("Ruler of the Caucasus") by the Russians. It is unlikely that Russia will let matters unfold there without further direct intervention. One can only hope that the Ossetians will survive the current turmoil that afflicts the Caucasus.

If the Ossetians are known at all in the West outside of linguistic circles, where they play a minor role in Indo-European studies, it is because they are the bearers of the so-called Nart sagas. These are a set of heroic tales, somewhere between myth and saga in tone, which the Ossetians share with their non–Indo-European neighbors to the west, the Circassians, Ubykhs, Abazas, and Abkhaz, and to some extent with those to the south, the Svans and Georgian highlanders, and to the east, the Chechen-Ingush and the Daghestanis, as well as with some of the small neighboring Turkic peoples, such as the Balkars and Karachays. No one can read these vivid, complex, chaotic tales without a sense of astonishment, for not only do they show numerous, striking, detailed parallels with the lore of ancient India and Greece, as one might expect from their intermediate position between these two great traditions, but they also show similar parallels with, of all things, the Arthurian cycle. One's first impulse, as was mine, is to dismiss these Arthurian parallels as due to mere chance. One's second impulse, as was mine too, is to set them aside as curious but enigmatic. What Littleton and Malcor did, however, was take the third inexorable step and examine these parallels critically and in detail. This is their second great achievement.

As their third achievement, regardless of which arguments or etymologies one might find compelling or otiose, Littleton and Malcor have added four new dimensions to the field of Arthurian studies. They have opened the doors to Eurasian steppe archaeology and the iconography of its artifacts; they

have shown the worth of carefully examining the scanty European remains of the vanished Iranians of the steppes; they have shown at least the possibility, and most likely the plausibility, that the Arthurian cycle, however seamless and whole it may seem, is comprehensible only in terms of an Iranian core, much like the Nart sagas, with an overlay of Celtic material, which has been strongly influenced by Roman hegemony; and finally, they have brought long overdue attention to the Nart sagas of the Caucasus and to the cultures and languages of the Ossetians and their neighbors. Examining many of their claims and arguments will entail a vast amount of new study and hard work for the Arthurian scholar. Nevertheless, the parallels between the Iranian material and the Arthurian cycle are so numerous, and in many cases so exact, that this effort must be taken on by the scholarly establishment concerned with Arthur and his origins. The study of the Arthurian corpora will never be the same after this book, and our understanding of the origins of so much of our own civilization, I may safely say, will never look quite the same again.

John Colarusso
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario
16 August 1993

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We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to our spouses, Mary Ann Littleton and Daniel Malcor, for their patience, understanding, and unstinting support during a long and sometimes difficult period. A special note of thanks to Daniel for his computer skills and talents that guided us expertly through the computer systems and programs used to compile this book.

Finally we wish to emphasize that the ideas and interpretations that are presented in this work are strictly our own, and we take full responsibility for them.

Preface

This edition of *From Scythia to Camelot* corrects some unfortunate errors that managed to find their way into the 1994 hardcover edition and incorporates some significant new discoveries and reinterpretations. The most important of these relate to the career of Lucius Artorius Castus, the second century C.E. Roman officer whose name and exploits provided the historical basis of the legends of King Arthur (see Chapter 2). We now know vastly more about him than we did five years ago. Indeed, it has recently become evident that the twelve victories attributed to "Arthur" by Nennius and others, including the famous one at Badon Hill, which are conventionally dated to the early sixth century C.E., may actually have been won by Lucius Artorius Castus between 183–185 C.E. in Northern Britain, and that the defeated enemy were not invaders from the so-called "Saxon Shore," but rather marauding Caledonians from what is now Scotland (see Appendix 3). We have also updated our discussion of the Iazyges role in, and impact on, the Roman military system in late second-century Britain to reflect some recent archaeological discoveries at Ribchester and other Roman sites associated with these Sarmatian *numeri* from north of the Danube, who brought with them a treasury of hero tales that eventually became the core of the Arthurian and Holy Grail legends (see Chapter 1). Moreover, we have taken to heart the legitimate criticisms of those scholars who have reviewed the hardcover edition and have modified and/or deleted several passages that can no longer be supported as originally written.

In addition to the people thanked in the Acknowledgments, many of whom also had input into the current edition, we would like to express our profound

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Introduction

Some ideas develop slowly, as bits and pieces of a puzzle begin to assume a pattern. Other ideas leap into focus fully armed and ready for battle.

The initial discovery that led to this book, that the medieval Arthurian legends are rooted in an epic tradition that flourished in ancient Scythia (i.e., the south Russian and Ukrainian steppes; see map 1) in the first millennium Before the Common Era (B.C.E.), belongs to the latter category. This discovery was made with remarkable suddenness one morning in the fall of 1975 in the course of a casual conversation with J.P. Mallory, who at the time was a doctoral candidate in Indo-European Studies at UCLA.[1]

Mallory happened to observe that at the end of the Marcomannian War in the year 175 of the Common Era (C.E.), the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius sent a contingent of 5,500 Sarmatian *cataphracti*, or heavily armed auxiliary cavalry, from Pannonia (modern Hungary) to Britain. He also pointed out that their descendants managed to survive as an identifiable ethnic enclave at least until the beginning of the fourth century, and perhaps longer. Mallory had just read an abbreviated account of these events in Tadeusz Sulimirski's *The Sarmatians* (1970) and simply wanted to share what at the time seemed to be nothing more than a curious bit of trivia.

However, C. Scott Littleton had recently read a pair of fascinating articles by the eminent French medievalist Joël Grisward (1969, 1973) that pointed out some remarkable parallels between the death of King Arthur, especially as described in the fifteenth century by Sir Thomas Malory in his celebrated *Le Morte Darthur*, and a saga told by the Ossetians, a

contemporary Caucasian people, about the death of their most important hero, Batraz.

Batraz, the leader of a band of heroes known as the Narts, like Arthur possesses a magical sword.[2] After wreaking vengeance on the Narts for the death of his father, the repentant Batraz commands the surviving Narts to throw his sword into the sea. Dismayed at the size of the wondrous weapon, they hide it, telling their leader that they have carried out his last wish. But only Batraz knows what will happen when the sword is consigned to the water, and he implores the Narts to do as he has ordered. When they finally manage to throw the sword into the sea, a prodigious thing happens. The water suddenly becomes extremely turbulent and then turns blood-red. As soon as this is reported to Batraz, he dies and is buried by the Narts.[3]

The details are different: the Narts as a group hide the sword, whereas in Malory it is Bedivere alone who hides Excalibur, and the prodigious event in the Ossetic tale does not involve a hand rising from the water to grasp the sword. Otherwise the stories are so similar that the possibility of a chance parallelism is remote. Grisward could not explain this and other parallels between the tales and simply suggested that there may have been an ancient contact of one sort or another between the ancestors of the Ossetians and the ancestors of the Celts, who, he presumed, originally shaped the Arthurian romances.

As we shall see, that contact is clearly much more recent and specific. Linguistically the Ossetians are the last surviving descendants of the ancient Alans and related tribes, who in turn were almost indistinguishable from the Sarmatians. It was this fact that rang a bell in Littleton's head when he began to digest Mallory's comment. It was not long before Littleton located the *locus classicus*: a passage in Dio Cassius's *Roman History*,[4] written ca. 225 C.E., that describes how, at the end of the Marcomannian War, 8,000 *cataphracti* from a Sarmatian tribe known as the Iazyges (or Jazyges) were impressed into the Roman legions. Of these Iazyges 5,500 were sent to Britain.[5] Thus, thanks to Mallory's chance remark, Littleton had made the "Sarmatian Connection," that is, the historical connection that explains the parallels Grisward had discovered.

Littleton soon learned that the Iazygian auxiliaries were posted in groups of five hundred to the garrisons along Hadrian's Wall. When their period of service was over, the veterans were settled in a *vicus*, or veterans' colony, at Bremetennacum Veteranorum, an important Roman cavalry post near the modern village of Ribchester in southwest Lancashire.[6] He also learned that their first commander was a Roman officer named Lucius Artorius Castus, prefect of the VI Legion Victrix, which was headquartered at York (Eboracum) and charged with the defense of northern Britain.[7]

More pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. The famous Sword in the Stone episode, wherein the young Arthur pulled a sword from a stone and thereby established his right to the throne of Britain, is mirrored in the ancient Alanic custom of thrusting swords into the earth as symbols of a warrior-deity.[8] Similarities have come to light between other Nart heroes and heroines, such as Soslan (or Sozryko), Syrdon, Xæmyc, and Satana, and Arthurian figures, such as Gawain, Kay, Uther Pendragon, and the Lady of the Lake, respectively (see chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 5).

Then the literature concerning the quest for the Holy Grail, an integral part of the Arthurian corpus,[9] began to come into clearer focus. It became apparent that these enigmatic tales are similar to a series of Nart sagas that describe a dispute over which Nart—or, more accurately, which clan of Narts—will have the honor of guarding a magical cup (or cauldron) called the Nartamongæ, or "Revealer of the Narts." Although unrelated to the Chalice of the Last Supper, the Nartamongæ, like the Grail, is a magical vessel that never runs dry and that appears at feasts before the bravest of heroes.

By 1978, when the first article on this subject by Littleton and an early collaborator, Anne C. Thomas, appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore*,[10] it was clear that both the origin and distribution of at least the core of the Arthurian and Holy Grail legends were not rooted in the ancient Celtic tradition, as many scholars had heretofore believed,[11] but rather were derived from the same Northeast Iranian epic tradition that gave rise to the Nart sagas.

To say that this hypothesis was (and is) controversial is an understatement. As time went on, however, Littleton began to receive support from several scholars in the field, including Helmut Nickel, currently Curator Emeritus of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, whose own research into the origins of European chivalry had led him to similar conclusions.[12]

Nevertheless, there were some major lacunae. Lancelot, for example, the most distinguished, if morally flawed, of Arthur's knights, resisted interpretation in terms of the "Sarmatian Connection." It was at this point, in the spring of 1983, that Linda A. Malcor (née Peterson) came into the picture.

Malcor had long been interested in the origin and evolution of Lancelot and the Arthurian tradition in general, and when she learned of Littleton's hypothesis it seemed to make good sense. She set about attempting to apply the hypothesis in her ongoing attempts to understand the Lancelot materials. Littleton still considered the knight in question to be a major Celtic component of the tradition,[13] and he, like many contemporary Arthurian scholars,[14] implicitly accepted the assumption that the name Lancelot could be analyzed as "Lance à Lot," and that underlying this was a reference to the spear wielded by the widespread ancient Celtic divinity Lug.[15] Both Lug and Lancelot were identified with the lance or spear, and both were at or near the apexes of their respective traditions. It seemed extremely probable that this famous hero, who, after Arthur himself, is arguably the most important figure in the tradition, had no connection whatsoever with the Sarmatian or any other Northeast Iranian steppe culture.

But Malcor persisted in her efforts to tie this enigmatic figure into the same steppe tradition that Littleton believed had spawned Arthur. One afternoon, in the course of a discussion in which he was stoutly defending Lancelot's Celtic pedigree, she dropped the bombshell that ultimately led to this collaboration: might the name in question be derived from an as-yet-unattested sobriquet, "Alanus à Lot," that is, "the Alan of Lot?"

All at once a great many more pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The Alans, first cousins of the Iazyges, who in company with the Visigoths, Vandals, and other Germanic tribes had

settled in small enclaves in Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula in the early years of the fifth century,[16] had brought with them an independent reflex of the common Northeast Iranian steppe epic tradition. In addition, as will shortly be demonstrated, the Lot region of southern Gaul (see map 8) was a center of Alan activity, as well as power, since almost from the start the Romans saw fit to entrust their Alan "allies" with local administrative duties.[17]

Evidence rapidly began to accumulate that this **(A)lan(u)s-à-Lot*, whose name eventually came to be rendered as Lancelot,[18] was in all probability derived from the same prototype as Arthur and Batraz (see fig. 1). Indeed Lancelot has more in common with Batraz than does Arthur; and the Lancelot corpus, with its emphasis upon horsemanship and carts, is far more reminiscent of the steppes than is the "Celticized" British variant. In short, thanks to Malcor's insight, an important dimension of what was now clearly the "Alano-Sarmatian Connection" had come to light.

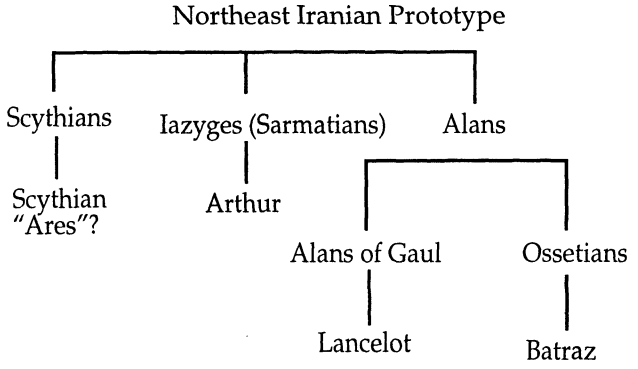

FIG. 1. Proposed Development of the Legends of Arthur, Lancelot, and Batraz

At the same time Malcor began to discover a strong Alan component in the Holy Grail legends. Here too the continental Alans appeared to have played a major role. One group of Alans, allied with Alaric's Visigoths, seems to have stolen some vessels from the Basilica of St. Peter's during the sack of Rome in 410

(see chaps. 9 and 10), and one of these objects was probably a sacred chalice of some sort, perhaps a holy relic associated by the early church with the Last Supper, which these still-pagan marauders came to associate with the prototype of the magical Nartamongæ. This treasure was eventually carried to southern Gaul, to the region traditionally associated with the Grail legends. Yet as a result of a sequence of events that will be traced in chapter 9 the sacred cup, as well as the rest of the treasure, disappeared from sight shortly thereafter. This disappearance fostered the ideas that the Holy Grail, like the Nartamongæ, was hidden from all but the bravest or purest warriors and that the cup was the object of a sacred quest.

All of these matters will be addressed in the chapters that follow. Before considering them, however, we should point out that we are not the first to suggest that the legends of the Round Table developed in the East and diffused to the West. For example, in 1170 a certain Alanus[19] commented that Arthur was perhaps "better known to the peoples of Asia Minor than to the *Britanni* [the Welsh and Cornish]," making what is perhaps the earliest allusion to the notion that the stories of the Round Table came from the East.[20] Several modern scholars have also suggested that many of the Arthurian legends, as well as other legends that arose in medieval France, had their roots in the Orient. Karl Pannier suggests that the core of the story of "Flore and Blanscheflur" came from the Orient but that the form that diffused throughout Western Europe was forged in the north of France.[21] Closs went so far as to suggest that the concept of the Grail originated on the "borders of Persia and Afghanistan."[22] Although Stein has argued that this "oriental" influence consists only of the most basic folkloric motifs, other scholars feel that this influence is more direct.[23] Some of them attribute this influence to the Crusades, with knights returning from the East with tales that were then recast in a European form.[24] This influence, however, can be attributed to a much earlier historical context.

It is also possible to suggest that the historical Arthur fought most of his battles in northern Britain and that his association with Wales, Glastonbury, and other southern locations came much later.[25] That some, if not all of the

Arthurian legends originated in northern Britain and later diffused southward is supported by Eisner, who also suggests that some "Mediterranean" themes may have diffused to this region, as well as to Ireland, via the early Christian monks.[26] Yet it is now clear that the themes in question originated in an area remote from the Mediterranean and arrived in northern Britain almost three centuries before the legendary Arthur rode over the British countryside with his knights. These legends were then imprinted by specific historical events that occurred in Late Antiquity, the major participants in which were the dramatically displaced tribes of Sarmatians and Alans who found themselves settled in Britain and Gaul.

Methodology and Plan of Research

Rather than starting from the assumption that the Arthurian tradition is of Celtic derivation and searching through the evidence to support our position we have chosen to examine the entire Arthurian tradition from scratch and see where that analysis leads us. The best means of securing a "comprehensive view of . . . [a] whole [narrative] tradition" is still to use the historic-geographic, or "Finnish," method of study.[27] Some scholars have previously conducted studies using a hybrid of the historic-geographic method, drawing on such media as sculpture, painting, architecture, manuscript illumination, metalwork, and glasswork in addition to narrative texts.[28] The mass of evidence available for folklore studies of this nature makes such studies enormously time-consuming, and they often produce unsatisfactory results.[29]

The first step in this research project, then, was to assemble a data base by means of an extensive search of the medieval visual arts, church ritual, liturgical and secular dramas, literature, and popular traditions.[30] The next step was to analyze the collected material and to break the examples of folklore into categories of variation (e.g., "Sword in the Stone" vs. "Sword Thrown into the Lake"). We examined each piece of evidence, as far as possible, in context and used almost every available

analytic technique, from neo-euhemerism to traditional comparative mythology.[31]

We examined the results. We studied less popular variants for geographical or historical limits to their distribution. We noted frequency of occurrence for the specific stories, as well as the extent of the distribution of each variant. We examined each datum in light of similar data from the same medium (i.e., literary examples were compared with literary examples) and in light of similar data from different media (i.e., an illumination was compared with similar variants found in enamelwork and literature). We compared contextual information for each example in each group of variants to see if there was any correlation between specific combinations of contextual data and specific forms of the variant. The ultimate goal of this portion of the research was to identify sources for the legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail.

The final step was to search for sources for these stories, based on our analysis of their content, amid historical, theological, artistic, and folkloric sources. This book is the summary of our results. Where necessary we have included "scenarios," that is, hypothetical sequences of events, based on our findings, that we believe took place in order to produce the Arthurian tales as we have them in their twelfth- and thirteenth-century forms.

Although there is a remote possibility that the legends of the Round Table and the Nart sagas are parallel only at the hypothetical Indo-European level, with the different strands of these legends developing independently of one another, evidence of more recent contact between the Northeast Iranian-speaking peoples and the peoples of Europe strongly suggests that these tales were transmitted from one of these cultures to the other. Our preliminary findings indicated that a non-Celtic source lay at the center of the Arthurian tradition, with Celtic, Christian, Germanic, and many other overlays, depending upon the geographical and cultural point of generation of each datum. Sometimes this non-Celtic source seemed to derive from the folklore of the "Scythian" (i.e., general Northeast Iranian) culture; at other times the source seemed more closely related to the documented history of various Alano-Sarmatian tribes of

these peoples. Moreover contact between the Northeast Iranian-speaking peoples and the peoples of Europe during Late Antiquity occurred on a scale that could easily have affected the tales that were recorded in the manuscript evidence of the Middle Ages.[32]

In this book we show that there were numerous opportunities for the transmission of these legends, that there was information to be transmitted, that there is evidence that such transmission in fact took place, and that the direction of this diffusion was from the homeland of the Northeast Iranian-speaking peoples to Europe. We do not claim that we have discovered the final "truth" about the nature and origin of these legends. If what follows serves to stimulate new research that eventually disproves our conclusions, we will count ourselves successful. It is in this spirit that this book, which admittedly challenges a great many commonly held assumptions, ought to be read.

So now, before moving to the consideration of specific figures, themes, and images, let us review the cultural and historical evidence relative to "Scythia" and its denizens in the early years of the Common Era and the trail that led from there to Camelot.

NOTES

1. Mallory is currently senior lecturer in archaeology at the Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

2. Cf. Dirr 1912; Dumézil 1930, 1965.

3. Dumézil 1930:69.

4. Cary 1927.

5. Dio 71.11; Cary 1927:37.

6. For a detailed study of this settlement see Richmond (1945).

7. Malone 1925. As Nickel (1975a:10–11) points out, Castus had served in Pannonia and would thus have been thoroughly familiar with

both the customs and the fighting ability of his new Sarmatian auxiliaries. According to Malone (1925:370–372) this Roman general also seems to have led the Iazyges in an expedition to Armorica (northern Gaul), where they helped put down a local rebellion. The year was probably 184 C.E. (Ashe 1985:116).

8. Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.4.22; Rolfe 1939:395.

9. E.g., Weston 1957. Weston's reliance on the theories of Sir James Frazer strongly colored her interpretation of the Grail tradition. See Segal 1993:xix–xxxv.

10. Littleton and Thomas 1978:512–527.

11. E.g., Loomis 1991.

12. Cf. Nickel 1975a, 1975b.

13. Cf. Littleton and Thomas 1978:524.

14. E.g., Jenkins 1975:78–79.

15. Cf. Lugh, Ludd, Lleu, et al.

16. Sulimirski 1970:186–187; Bachrach 1973:136; see chaps. 3 and 9.

17. Bachrach 1973:33–37; Goffart 1980:111–114.

18. As Bachrach (1973:135–136) points out, it was not unusual for Alanic names to lose the initial vowel as they passed into French, Spanish, and Italian. There are numerous examples of the loss of the initial *A-* in Alanic place-names in both France and Italy, especially in toponyms in which an "of" element is present. The modern north Italian name Landriano derives from Alan d'Riano (*Dizionario Enciclopedico dei Comuni d'Italia*, 1950, 2:747); the French toponym Lanet (a town in the Aude, a region that played host to more than its share of Alan settlements) was originally called Villa de Alianto (ca. 951; Sabarthés 1912:195–196). We cannot offer any attested personal names that exhibit this characteristic, but its presence in several place-names lends powerful support to Malcor's reconstruction of **(A)lanus-à-Lot*. Colarusso (personal communication, MS comment, August 1992) has suggested that such a name, passing through a Celtic "filter," would tend to lose the initial *A-*, since this would have been seen as a definite article. The name would then be rendered **A-lanus-à-Lot*.

19. Given the hypothesis advanced in this book, it is curious to note that someone named Alanus would be credited with the earliest example of the notion that the Arthurian legends were of eastern origin.

20. Loomis 1963:13.

21. Stein 1988:44.

22. Matthews 1984:41–42.

23. Stein 1988:44; cf. Adolf 1947.

24. Faugère 1979:198–205.

25. Cf. Goodrich 1986.

26. Eisner 1969.

27. Thompson 1946:440. Cf. Woods 1955, 1959; Pentikäinen 1968. This method was pioneered by the eminent Finnish folklorists Kaarle Krohn (1926) and Antti Aarne (1961).

28. E.g., Mellinkoff 1970; Malcor 1991.

29. However, as Thompson (1946:430) points out:

> Though this scheme has . . . been subjected to some adverse criticism, it has been employed in a number of excellent studies, the general validity of which can hardly be doubted, and the method has been continually improved. No one who really knows about the behavior of oral tales can take exception to the careful analysis which is the foundation of the technique.

30. The results of all such studies should be treated with caution for the purpose of analysis, since some data will be inadvertently omitted by the researchers' own oversights as well as by the loss or destruction of evidence over the course of time.

31. E.g., Bolle 1970; Puhvel 1987.

32. E.g., Bachrach 1973.

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PART I

The Cultural and Historical Background

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CHAPTER 1

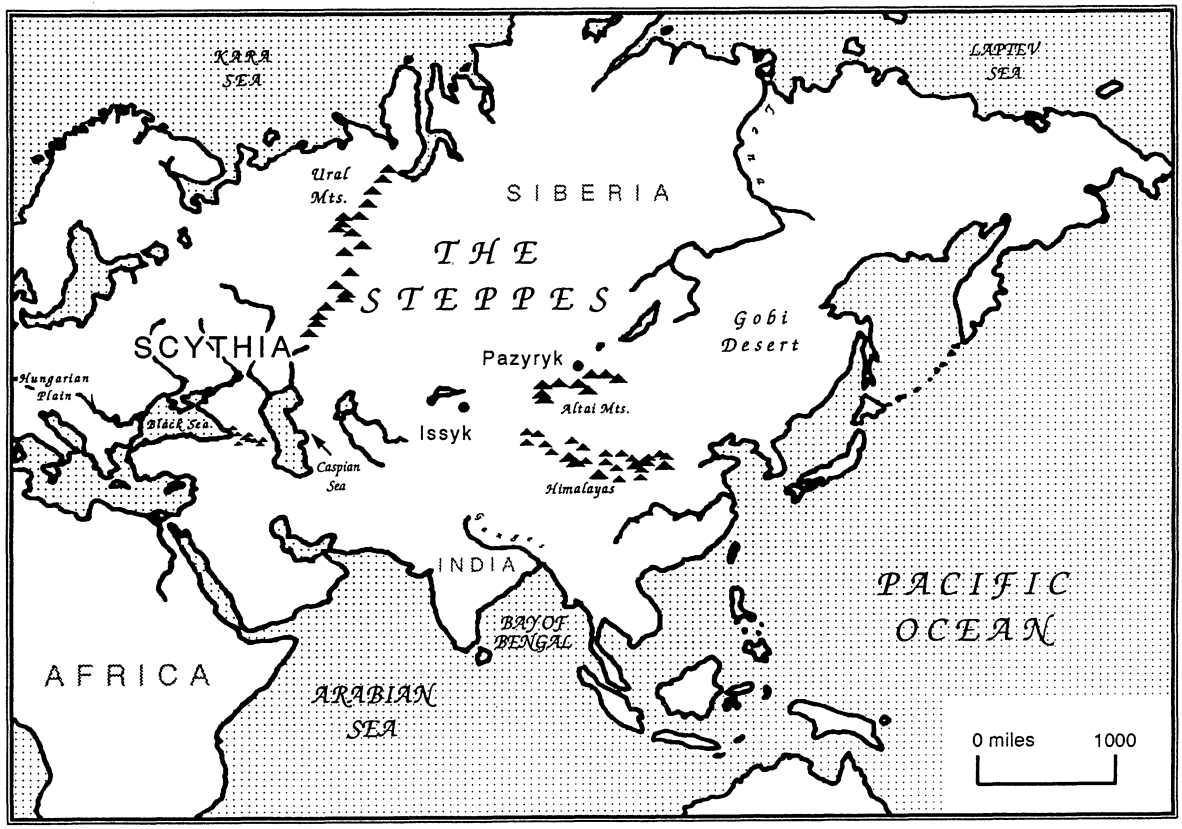
The Northeast Iranians

Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, and Ossetians

This book argues that the core of the Arthurian and Holy Grail legends derives originally from a region known in antiquity as Scythia, that is, the western portion of the great "sea of grass" that stretches from the Altai Mountains to the Hungarian Plain (see map 1). We must therefore take a closer look at several of the ethnic groups that originated in this vast steppe region. Almost all of them spoke languages belonging to what linguists call the Northeast Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian substock of the Indo-European language family;[1] most scholars now think that the linguistic differences among these several groups were minimal and that they not only shared a closely related set of dialects but also a common culture.[2]

Scythians

One of the earliest of these Northeast Iranian steppe peoples, or at least the earliest to have an impact on the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean basin, was known to the Greeks as the *Σκύθαι* (i.e., Scythians). Here we encounter a major terminological paradox: "Scythian" can be used in two ways. In the narrow sense it is limited to the ancient Scythian tribes, as described by Herodotus and other Greco-Roman authorities. In the broad sense it applies to *all* of the groups we will survey in this chapter, including the modern Ossetians,[3] who can perhaps be considered "epi-Scythians." The region's ancient name,



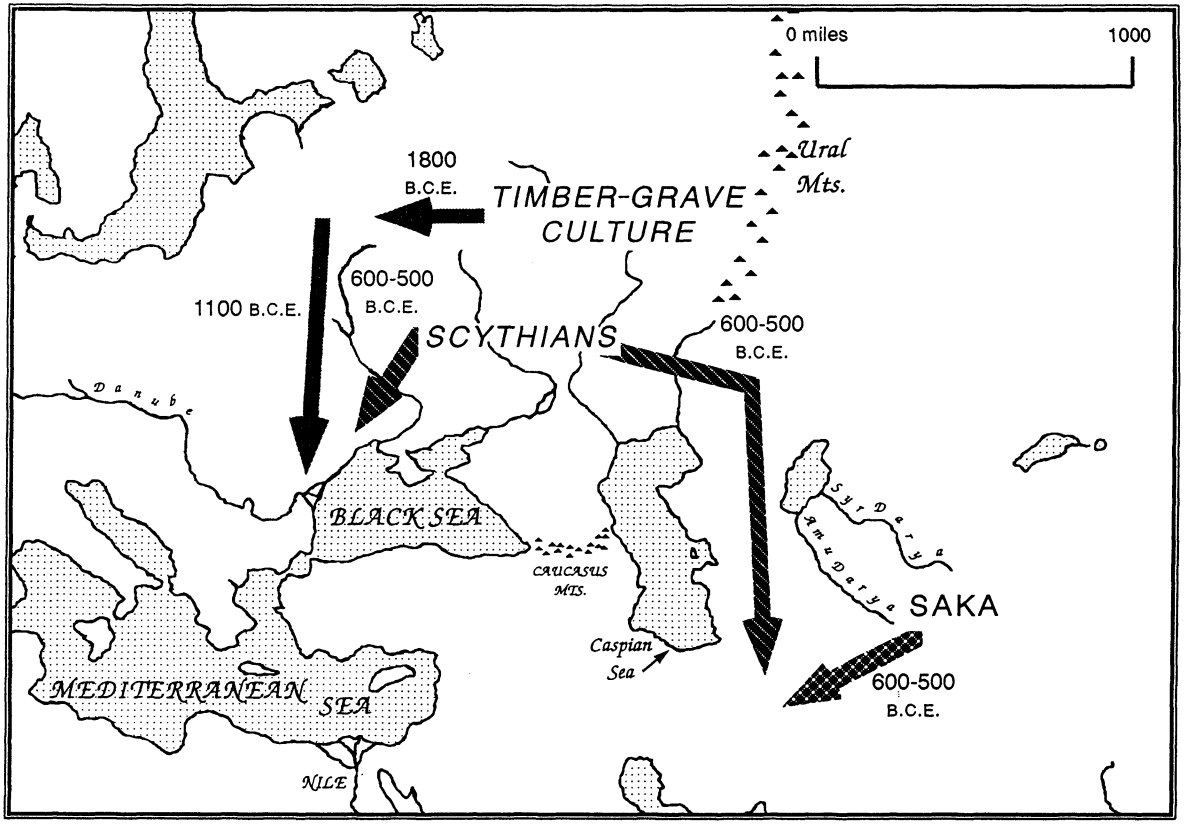
MAP 1. Ancient Scythia

Scythia, reflects this inclusive notion that anyone who called the "sea of grass" home was a "Scythian."

The Scythians expanded into the West in several major waves (see map 2). The first, which Gimbutas describes as "proto-Scythian," originated well east of the Urals.[4] Known archaeologically as the Timber-Grave Culture, this wave began expanding westward as early as 1800 B.C.E.[5] A second wave, this time of Scythian mounted nomads who buried their dead in timber-lined tumuli, swept across the more settled, agricultural communities of the north Pontic steppes and incorporated some of the indigenous cultivators, who became known as "Agricultural Scythians" (ca. 1100 B.C.E.).[6] Then, ca. 600–550 B.C.E., a third wave migrated westward out of southern Siberia.[7] These latecomers, who eventually pushed west along the north coast of the Black Sea as far as Bulgaria and who invaded northeast Iran as well, bore several ethnic labels (see map 3). Among them were the Massagetae (southeast of the Aral Sea), the Saka (northeastern Iran, western Afghanistan), the Thyssagetae (the central Urals), and a people Herodotus calls the "Sauromatae,"[8] who seem to have been the immediate ancestors (or earliest known example) of the Sarmatians.

Although all of these subtribes seem to have shared a similar way of life, the westernmost group, which roamed the Pontic steppes in the fifth century B.C.E. (ca. 450 B.C.E.), provided most of our nonarchaeological information about Scythian culture.[9] According to Herodotus[10] there were three major social strata (or tribes): "Royal Scythians," pastoral nomads who formed the ruling elite; "Warrior Scythians," also nomads, who maintained and extended the power of the former group; and "Agricultural Scythians," most likely comprising conquered, "Scythianized," indigenous peoples.

The Scythian economy was a mixture of pastoralism and settled cultivation, although the former seems to have taken precedence, as it still does among the Kazakhs and other modern inhabitants of the eastern portion of this region.[11] As among those Altaic peoples who came to the region in more recent times, the horse was the primary, or at least the most prestigious, animal herded. The Scythians were the first great cavalry nation. Unlike the ancient Celts, who still relied on horse-drawn chariots



MAP 2. Major Migrations of Steppe Cultures