

Scythian people weren't just nomadic warriors, but sometimes settled down

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Bronze mirror found at the site of Mamai-Gora. Credit: Svetlana Andrukh (CC-BY 4.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

As far back as the Greek historian Herodotus, a group of people called the Scythians were considered highly mobile warrior nomads.

Scythian-era people lived across Eurasia from about 700 BCE to 200 BCE, and have long been considered highly mobile warriors who ranged widely across the steppe grasslands. Herodotus describes Scythian populations as living in wagons and engaging in raiding and warfare, and this view has persisted throughout history—supported by archeologists' observations of similar styles of horse harnesses, weapons, burial mounds and animal style motifs throughout what is now Ukraine.

Because of this, history has lumped the diverse cultures and periods of people in this region as a single "Scythian" identity, even calling it an "empire." But a study including University of Michigan research reveals what previously was considered one group was likely a set of diverse peoples with varied diets.

Mamai-Gora Mirror.pngBy analyzing human bone and tooth enamel, the international team of researchers found that, rather than being wide-ranging warriors, people in this region more likely lived in urban locales, growing millet and raising livestock in mixed economic systems. The team's results are published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

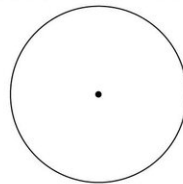
"Our study demonstrates overall low levels of human mobility in the vicinity of key urban locales of the Scythian era, in contrast to previous stereotypes of highly nomadic populations," said Alicia Ventresca Miller, lead author of the study and U-M assistant professor of anthropology. "While long-distance mobility increased during the Scythian era relative to preceding periods, it was limited to a small percentage of individuals."



- Cenozoic estimated strontium ratios 0.709-0.711
- Mesozoic estimated strontium ratios 0.707-0.709
- Paleozoic estimated strontium ratios 0.711-0.713
- Precambrian estimated strontium ratios 0.712-0.780

○ Site and 10 km ring

○ Site and 50 km ring



Site and >90 km ring

Scythian era sites:

1. Bel'sk, 2. Mamai-Gora, 3. Medvin,
4. Alexandropol', 5. Babina Mogila,
6. Drana Kokhta, 7. Ordzhonikidze,
8. Zolotaya Balka

Sites from other periods:

9. Vinogradnoe, 10. Peshtchanka,
11. Kirovograd, 12. Shakta Stepnaya,
13. Nevskoe

Extent of mobility of population from Scythian era and earlier sites. Credit: James Johnson and John Klausmeyer

Ventresca Miller, formerly of the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, and her team took samples of bone and tooth enamel from 56 human skeletons at three burial sites—Bel'sk, Mamai-Gora and Medvin—in modern-day Ukraine. The team examined these samples using isotope analysis. This kind of analysis examines isotopes of elements—in this study, strontium, oxygen, nitrogen and carbon—deposited in human tissues through eating and drinking. This allows researchers to determine where an individual traveled and lived based on the unique isotope composition in their tissue.

Together, these analyses showed that urban locales were places of social and economic diversity where people farmed millet and raised livestock. These findings suggest people largely stayed where they farmed and raised livestock—though they did tend to move around more than previous eras.

"The Scythian epoch was clearly a period of contradictions, with strong evidence for complex interactions between agro-pastoralists and pastoralists that contributed to population aggregation in urban locales," said Ventresca Miller, who is also assistant curator of Asian archeology at the U-M Museum of Anthropological Archaeology. "This study highlights the potential use of using isotopic analysis to directly assess prevailing models of economies and mobilities during the Scythian era."

In the future, researchers hope to provide further insights into how people moved between site types, such as urban centers versus rural settings, as well as between individuals with different grave goods and apparent social status.

"In this way, we can move further away from assumed stereotypes of migration and nomadism toward dynamic and complex insights into globalized Scythian societies," Ventresca Miller said.

More information: Ventresca Miller AR, Johnson J, Makhortykh S, Gerling C, Litvinova L, Andrukh S, et al. (2021) Re-evaluating Scythian lifeways: Isotopic analysis of diet and mobility in Iron Age Ukraine. *PLoS ONE* 16(3): e0245996. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245996

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