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Methods of Iron Age Tattooing: Evidence from the Scythian Tombs

As technological advancements are made and archeological finds provide more evidence for study, there are ever increasing examples of tattooing from the Medieval era all the way back to Neolithic times. In my research it is my goal to recreate how a tattoo might have been made in period, specific to each civilization. I chose to examine evidence of Scythian tattooing from the Pazyryk Tombs first for this ongoing project because the tattoos are some of the most well preserved on any mummy ever discovered. The designs are fanciful, bold, and just as beautiful as the day they were applied some 2,500 years ago, between the 5th and the 3rd century B.C.E. (Krutak, pg. 215).

Scythian Burials and Artifacts

My research for recreating Iron Age¹ tattoos begins in the Altai Mountains, a mountain range located centrally to where modern-day Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan all come together (Altai Mountains, Wikipedia). From about 900 to 200 B.C.E. tribes of nomadic horsemen, known as the Scythians, roamed this area from the Black Sea to Inner Asia. The Scythians never had a written language, however there are historical accounts from the Persians, Assyrians, and detailed descriptions from Greek historians including Herotitus. In ancient times the Scythians were famous for their skilled archers and warriors who fought from horseback. (British Museum). Today, they are perhaps best known for their

¹ "The Pazyryk culture is an Iron Age archaeological culture (c. 6th to 3rd centuries BC) identified by excavated artifacts and mummified humans found in the Siberian permafrost in the Altai Mountains." (Iron Age, Wikipedia). Time periods are defined differently depending on region.

expertly crafted golden artifacts recovered from the many *kurgan*, or burial chambers (Krutak, pg. 68) The Pazyryk and Sarmatians, whose burials I will discuss, both belong to the wider Scythian cultural group (Pazyryk/Sarmatian, Wikipedia).



Gold plaque of a mounted Scythian. Black Sea region, c. 400–350 BC. © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V Terebenin. (BritishMuseum.org)

The first modern archeological discoveries from the kurgans were made by M. P. Gryaznov in 1929 (Pazyryk Burials, Wikipedia), and then later in 1947 by Sergei Rudenko in the Pazyryk Valley, which the cultural group was named after (Krutak, pg. 68). The Pazyryk burials are located in the Eastern Altai, where the average annual temperatures are low and even the summers are dry and cool (Rudenko, pg. 7). Here a combination of the proper climate and water freezing in the burials resulted in beautifully preserved mummies. The Sarmatian burials are located in a warmer climate of the Pontic- Caspian steppe and organic remains such as mummies did not survive, however the burials still contain tantalizing evidence of tattooing implements (Krutak, pg. 216).

The artifacts recovered from the kurgans are numerous and astonishing. Beautifully preserved gold artifacts, clothing, textiles, horse mounts, shoes, weapons, carriages, and tools that were recovered give researchers rich insight into the everyday lives of these ancient people. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, mummified remains bearing striking animalistic tattoos were also found (Rudenko). Originally, preserved tattoos were found in eight of the burials. A heavily tattooed man found in Kurgan 2 is described by Rudenko as being a Chief because of the wealth of artifacts buried with him. This led researchers to believe that tattooing was reserved for those with a high status in the Pazyryk culture. In 1993 a new excavation in Kurgan 1 unearthed a female with tattooed arms, then in 1995 a younger male was found in Kurgan 3 also with tattoos on his shoulders and arms. The young man was a warrior or soldier, and the female is thought to be a healer or story teller, both of lower status. It seems that tattooing was an integral part of life for any member of the nomadic tribes, whether they be of noble birth or just a commoner (Krutak, pg. 69-70).

The Chief from Kurgan 2 has some of the most remarkable body adornment. Although some mummy was damaged, the entire right arm from shoulder to hand was covered entirely in tattoos consisting of stylized animal figures. A donkey, carnivorous monsters, a deer with an eagle's beak (often referred to by sources as a griffin), and other deer or elk are depicted.

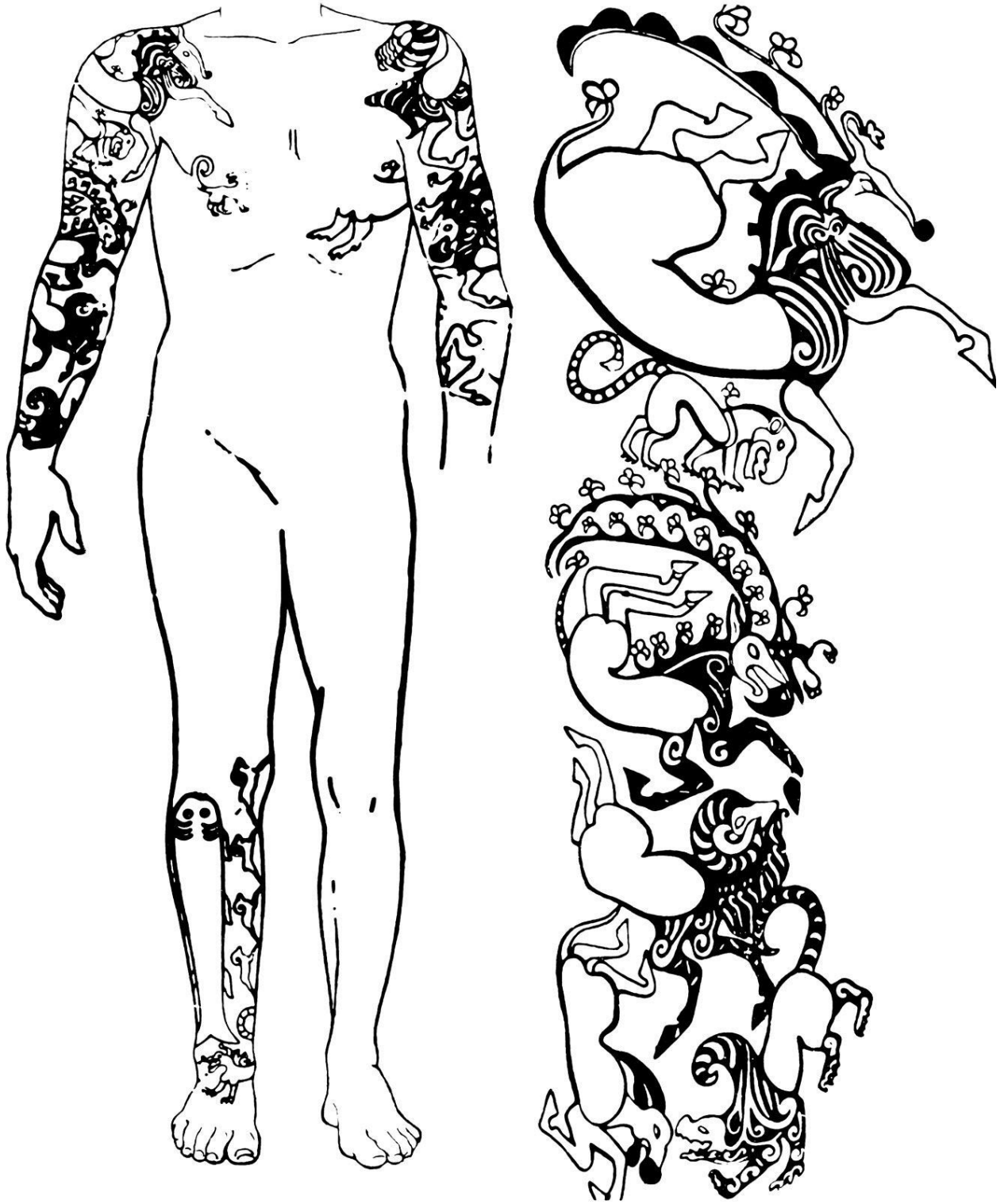


Illustration of Chief's tattoos. Rudenko, pg. 109 and 111.

One discovery of note from Kurgan 2 may be evidence of the Pazyryk people using the first transfers for the application of tattooing. A felt appliqué recovered from the same burial (Martynov, pg. 197) exactly matches the pattern of the ram figure on the man's right arm, allegedly. The possibility of leather or felt appliqué used to transfer tattoo patterns was mentioned in an online excerpt from a 1997 publication called the 'Tribal Bible', which references Martynov's book *Ancient Art of Northern Asia*. Here, a drawing of the felt artifact is shown which then references Rudenko's book *Frozen Tombs of Siberia*. However, at the current time I cannot locate a picture of the felt artifact in any of the plates available in *Frozen Tombs of Siberia*, nor is it available online from the Hermitage Museum which houses many other artifacts from this burial. Martynov cites the 1953 publication of Rudenko's book, and currently I only have the 1970 publication. It is possible that the plate or information was simply omitted in the newer version.

The largest collection of implements thought to be used in the practice of tattooing comes from Filippovka 1 burial site in the Russian Ural Mountains, a little under 4,000 km from the Pazyryk site. In Complex 1 of Burial 4, Kurgan 15, the skeleton of a woman, age 50 to 60 years old, was found. Iron needles, a bronze mirror, bone stenciling implements, a stone palette used for grinding pigments, as well as other tools were found in the grave. Complex 2 contained a woman in her late teens or early twenties. Found with her was another stone pallets, a bronze mirror, pieces of clay, an iron needle, iron knife, fossils shells perhaps used to store pigments, and a bone spoon.

Complex 3 also contained the remains of a woman approximately 30 to 35 years of age. Finds in this complex suggest a higher status of the woman buried here such as a large and heavily ornamented silver mirror, detailed with stylized eagles and winged bulls. Also among the finds was a hollowed out horse canine containing powdered red ochre, a whetstone, and six gold needles, three of which had looped ends likely for sewing, and the other three having twisted handles. (Krutak, pg. 217-223).

Additional artifacts found near the skeletons or contained in other parts of the burials include a leather bag containing black pigment, marking implements of bone and bronze, a piece of red ochre, iron needles (which were not well

preserved), and iron knives. Unfortunately, the remains of the females did not contain any preserved skin that may have yielded examples of tattooing.

From these findings, which are only associated with female burials, one can draw the conclusion that tattooing in the Sarmatian-Scythian culture was performed mostly, if not exclusively, by a woman. There is additional evidence that most ritual activities within the Sarmatian tribes were performed by the women. Archeologist Dr. Leonid Yablonsky explains, “Because the hypothesized tattoo complexes at Filippovka 1 were found to be associated with objects of worship, we can assume that if tattooing was indeed practiced, it was likely a ritualized aspect of the Sarmatian funerary cult. In turn, Sarmatian cultural values were transmitted through tattooed human skin during one’s lifetime and after death.” (Krutak, pg. 230)

Recreating Scythian Tattoos

My first opportunity for recreation of a Scythian tattoo was in December of 2019. A friend and fellow member of the SCA, Lord Salvador Rodrigo de Granada, contacted me about a specific tattoo from one of the Scythian burials. The tattoo he requested was a reproduction from the ‘Chief’ in Kurgan 2. The plan was to start with the uppermost tattoo, a deer-like beast with long antlers and eagle’s beak, and eventually continue down the arm reproducing the rest of the Chief’s tattoos. This was very exciting as I had already started researching and planning for Scythian tattooing. Because Salvador is a paid client I did not want to experiment with techniques or tools for this project. I planned to do the design as I would any other modern tattoos.

The first step was to create a drawing which could then be used to make a stencil transfer. This was easy as the Chief’s tattoo is well documented in photographs and by Rudenko, the archeologist who made the first discoveries in the burial. I easily re-traced the design digitally, printed it, and made a stencil. I then shaved his shoulder and chest, sanitized the area with alcohol, and applied the stencil. Because Salvador has slightly different proportions than the Scythian mummy, adjustments had to be made. For this I just drew them on by hand with a pen.

Using modern electric tattoo machines, single use tubes and steel needles, and modern ink, I spent approximately the next two hours applying the tattoo. After the tattoo was finished and looked over for any imperfections I again cleaned the area, applied petroleum jelly, and then bandaged him for the trip home. As of this writing I have not seen the healed tattoo, but the reports from him are good.

Originally we thought the shapes decorating the antlers represented flowers or leaves, however other examples of carved artifacts and descriptions by Rudenko show them to be representative of bird heads. The portion of the design at the front of the antlers (which can be seen in the photo below) is still a bit of a mystery. Was it originally an unfinished portion of the Chief's tattoos? Was it meant to be filled in, or was this portion of the design intentional? I have yet to find out.



Tattooing a Scythian design on Lord Salvador (M.K.A. Jozy Big Mountain). Photo by Megan Headly.

The next project I decided on was reproducing needles for tattooing. Currently, I do not have a forge or any metal working tools and scheduling time to access a forge proved difficult for the time being, so making needles from gold or iron was out for this project. Although many bone implements were found in the burials, nothing specific has been mentioned about bone needles being used by the Scythians for tattooing. However, I still believe it is plausible as bone tattoo

needles have been found in burials around the same time period but from other cultures, specifically Romanian and Egyptian (Krutak, plate 1 and 10). Also, the bone markers found in Kurgan 15 with the female remains have pointed ends. Is it possible these tips could have been sharpened for use as a tattoo needle as well as a marker?

For the purpose of making bone needles, Master Michael of Lancaster provided deer bone. I did not specifically choose the bones he gave to me, but they were long and straight and I felt them suitable for my use. I first split one of the bones longitudinally, cutting one end off. I tried to carve the ends down with a knife, which proved very difficult and I didn't make much progress in this method. I ended up using a Dremel cutting wheel to get a basic shape, and then sanding the points down with sandpaper, using a very fine grit to achieve a sharp point. The bone needles I produced are very similar to a modern recreation found in *Ancient Ink*. These bone needles would be used to prick the design into flesh, rather than sewn in. Rudenko describes the method, "The tattooing... could be done either by stitching or by pricking in order to introduce a black coloring substance, probably soot, under the skin. The method of pricking is more likely than sewing, although the Altaians of this time had very fine needles and thread with which to have executed this." He goes on to say, "The considerable depth of the coloring substance in the body inclines one to view that the tattooing was done not by sewing but by pricks." (Rudenko, pg. 112).

After creating the bone needles I decided to test the method first on a piece of pig skin, which is very commonly used in modern day apprenticeships for tattooers. In fact, a few of my very first tattoos were on pig skin. I decided to draw my own version of a Scythian 'animal-style' tattoo, taking elements from several of the tattoos including the pose of griffin from one of the male mummies, and created a reindeer design (Siberian Princess).



The application of the tattoo was relatively simple. I cleaned the skin, procured from the local butcher, from any fat or oils and transferred a stencil onto the skin. Dipping the bone needle into a plastic cap I repeatedly pricked the design in until I was satisfied with the concentration of marks. The whole process took maybe an hour.

Although the pig skin is a close approximation of human skin, there are several issues. First, there is no feedback on dead skin. The skin doesn't bleed or

release plasma, and capillary action does not spread the ink so I can't actually see if the needle is going too deep. Second, because there are no natural oils being produced by the dead skin, the stencil is almost impossible to remove. The remaining stencil is a dark purple and can still be seen around the tattooed design. The last issue is that the skin will never heal, so I will not get a true finished result from this method. It was, however, good practice and I felt confident in the method I used.

Originally, I did not plan on using a bone needle to tattoo a living human subject. However, curiosity got the better of me and I found a willing subject, Lord Crimthann Starfyre, M.K.A Jason French. I described the project and the potential risk, as well as the precautions I would take to mitigate risk of infection, to which he agreed in proceeding. After showing him several designs we settled on a winged monster, a design from the 'Chief' in Kurgan 2. I set my equipment up as I would for a modern tattoo and sanitized the area to be tattooed. I also resharpened the bone needle to be used, wiped it completely with alcohol, and then soaked the end in alcohol for about 5 minutes. I applied a stencil of the design on the back of his leg and once we were both satisfied I began working on the design. His description as the subject was that it was not much different than getting a modern tattoo. The initial few pricks would hurt more but as I went on, the pain was minimal. We completed the first half of the design in about an hour, after which we decided on a short break. At this point my shoulder was already pretty tired, as was my hand from gripping the needle.

After the break we continued until the entire design was complete. The entire process took a little over two hours, longer than I anticipated. I was very surprised that there was virtually no blood or plasma during or after the process. Although an outline will not bleed much, shading or filling in a tattoo with a modern machine can produce a significant amount of blood. A modern tattoo will usually be a bit raised or swollen, and sometimes red, mostly from cleaning or wiping the area. The skin around the bone needle tattoo showed almost no redness or swelling. After finishing the tattoo I cleaned the area, applied petroleum jelly, and then a bandage.

At the current time, the tattoo is still new so I am not able to report on the healed design. The tattoo should be completely healed in 1 to 3 weeks if properly cared for.

Conclusion

A tradition or a profession, tattooing is one of the oldest art forms man has ever practiced. As a professional tattoo artist I am interested in all aspects of my livelihood. Modern tattooing relies pretty heavily on technology. Most modern artists draw digitally on iPads or tablets, stencils are made with a thermofax machine, needles are made and shipped by large companies. Very few tattoo artists can build a tattoo machine, and even fewer would know how to solder their own needles. Mixing pigments is almost unheard of, and I personally have never done it. This project gave me a great opportunity to learn about, and get closer to the roots of my profession.

This is an ongoing project and there are still many more steps to take in the study of Scythian tattooing. In the future I plan on making iron and gold needles, a pigment mixing pallet, and my own inks. One of the questions that has not been resolved is about the use of felt or leather appliqué to transfer patterns for tattooing. I would like to find definitive evidence of a link between tattoos and the felt artifacts, and what method or substance may have been used to transfer a pattern. I would like to be able to produce a design from start to finish using only materials and tools I crafted.

Disclaimer

As a professional licensed tattoo artist, working in a licensed tattoo shop, I strongly discourage anyone from attempting or recreating anything described in this paper. There are a number of risks from blood borne pathogens involved and very special care was taken to limit risk.

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