

Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia

14 September 2017 – 14 January 2018

Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery

Supported by BP

Organised with the State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg, Russia

At the British Museum this autumn, discover an ancient culture that was buried in the Siberian permafrost for thousands of years. **The BP exhibition *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia*** will reveal the history of these powerful nomadic tribes who thrived in a vast landscape stretching from southern Russia to China and the northern Black Sea.

The Scythians were exceptional horsemen and warriors, and feared adversaries and neighbours of the ancient Greeks, Assyrians and Persians between 900 and 200 BC. This exhibition will tell their story through exciting archaeological discoveries and perfectly preserved objects frozen in time.

This will be the first major exhibition to explore the Scythians in the UK in 40 years. Many of the objects on display date back over 2,500 years. They are exceptionally well preserved as they come from burial mounds in the high Altai mountains of southern Siberia, where the frozen ground prevented them from deteriorating.

Over 200 outstanding objects will reveal all aspects of Scythian life, including a major loan in collaboration with the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, and other generous loans from the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Ashmolean Museum and the Royal Collection. Some are star pieces which are displayed in the permanent galleries and Treasury of the State Hermitage Museum and others have never been loaned to the UK before.

Objects preserved by the permafrost include multi-coloured textiles, fur-lined garments and accessories, unique horse headgear and tattooed human remains. Tattooing was common among the Scythians and incredible examples were preserved in the frozen tombs. This art shows natural and mythical animals with heavily contorted bodies, often in close combat, and we have examples of exceptionally well-preserved early tattooed remains on loan from the State Hermitage Museum.

Life in the Siberian landscape was tough and there was heavy competition for survival. The Scythians developed a fearsome set of weapons: pointed battle-axes and short swords for close combat and powerful bows for long-distance archery. Painted wooden shields, armour and a helmet have survived from the ancient tombs. The Scythians were skilled horsemen and they took their beloved horses with them to the grave so that they could carry on in the afterlife. Favourite horses were specially adorned for this and wore elaborate costumes, with masks, saddle pendants and covers for the mane and tail, which were intended to transform them into mythical beasts.

This exhibition will explore who the Scythians were, how they appeared, what they wore, who they traded with and what they ate and drank. Perfectly preserved seeds have been found in some tombs and were part of a Scythian ritual involving the deliberate inhalation of the smoke from charred hemp. The fifth century BC Greek historian Herodotus described how Scythians 'howled with pleasure' when they inhaled the smoke and how it was employed in cleansing rituals and for pain relief. A reconstruction in the exhibition shows an ancient brazier together with the hemp seeds and the felt hood which was put over the top like a miniature tent.

There are stunning pieces of gold jewellery, gold applique to adorn clothes, wooden drinking bowls, and a highly decorated leather bag even containing remarkably well-preserved lumps of cheese that are over 2,000 years old. There was a two-way influence between the culture of the Scythians and their settled 'civilised' neighbours. Many objects in this exhibition show evidence of cultural interaction, from Scythian wine-drinking learnt from the ancient Greeks and Persians, through ancient Greek craftsmen who depicted archers in Scythian dress, and the gold objects in the Achaemenid Oxus Treasure in the British Museum's collection that are influenced by Scythian art.

In about the second century BC the Scythians disappeared and were replaced by other nomadic powers. The exhibition concludes with an exploration of what happened afterwards and takes a look at life in southern Siberia in the early centuries AD. These objects are also spectacularly well preserved, but through extreme dryness rather than extreme cold.

Haunting painted clay death masks decorated to resemble the tattooed faces of the deceased are shown alongside beautiful clothing and the reconstructed log-cabin tomb chamber in which they were discovered. The growing application of archaeological science is unlocking clues to the past, and new results from collaborative work by the British Museum and the State Hermitage Museum will be included in the exhibition. This exhibition will allow visitors to discover the life and legacy of the Scythians, revealing their history like never before.

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Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, said: 'It is hugely exciting to be announcing the British Museum's autumn exhibition on the ancient Scythians and we look forward to sharing their fascinating story with our visitors. We are grateful to BP for their ongoing support without which enlightening exhibitions such as these would simply not be possible. We are delighted to be collaborating with the State Hermitage Museum on such a generous loan of Scythian objects and look forward to welcoming these important loans, and objects from other lenders, to London, to bring the extraordinary history of the Scythians to life.'

Bob Dudley, Group Chief Executive, BP, said: 'BP are proud to support the Scythian exhibition at the British Museum. We have operated in Russia for over 25 years; it's a fascinating country with a rich history and to see these artefacts, many of which have never left Russia before, is a real privilege. Through this exhibition visitors will gain a unique understanding of the people, the art and the influence of one of the earliest civilisations in Siberia.'

Notes to editors

The BP exhibition *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia* runs from 14 September 2017 to 14 January 2018 in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery at the British Museum. Exhibition supported by BP. Organised with the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.30, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 80 mins before closing.

Tickets £16.50, children under 16 free, concessions and group rates available. Booking fees apply online and by phone. britishmuseum.org/scythians
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The beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogue, The BP exhibition *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia*, edited by St John Simpson and Svetlana Pankova, will be published by Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum, hardback £40, paperback £30.

A full public programme of events will accompany the exhibition.

More information on this programme is available from the press office or online nearer the exhibition opening.

About BP

BP is proud to support the British Museum's *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia*, an exciting exhibition that will explore the rich culture of the Scythian people and their influence around the world.

BP operates in more than 70 countries worldwide including Russia. The company has been working in Russia for 25 years in collaboration with leading Russian oil and gas companies. BP's commitment to Russia goes beyond the development of oil and gas reserves. The company's overall support of local cultural, educational and technology projects has been the largest among foreign companies operating in Russia and includes partnerships with leading institutions such as the Mariinsky Theatre, The Hermitage, The Moscow Conservatory and 12 leading universities across the country.

BP has a long history as a major supporter of arts and culture in the UK. The company's partnership with the British Museum began in 1996, supporting a diverse range of initiatives including the creation of the BP Lecture Theatre. Today support for the Museum is focused on its special exhibitions programme.

BP's long-term partnerships with the British Museum, National Portrait Gallery, Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Opera House represent one of the most significant corporate investments in UK arts and culture.



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Further information

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at <http://bit.ly/2rD9qHI>