

INTRODUCTION

For millennia, the Eurasian Steppe was ruled by Iranian-speaking peoples. Later, Central Asia and a part of Inner Asia also came under Iranian control. Arriving from the steppe, the Iranians blended into the civilisations of these regions and became one of the most formidable adversaries of the Greeks and Romans. From the Late Copper Age and Early Bronze Age to the Mongolian invasion in the 13th century, successive waves of steppean groups reached the Danube Valley as well (fig. 1).

The Sarmatians, the most important barbarian population of the Roman Age in the Carpathian Basin, were of Iranian stock. The Sarmatians settled on the Great Hungarian Plain, occupying parts of modern Hungary, Serbia and Romania for over four hundred years. They inhabited the territory unusually densely and frequently tormented their mighty neighbour, the Roman Empire. At the close of the 2nd century AD, the philosopher emperor, Marcus Aurelius, made bold plans to exterminate and get rid of them, once and for all. His plan failed, and the Sarmatian population of the Carpathian Basin remained one of the region's key actors.

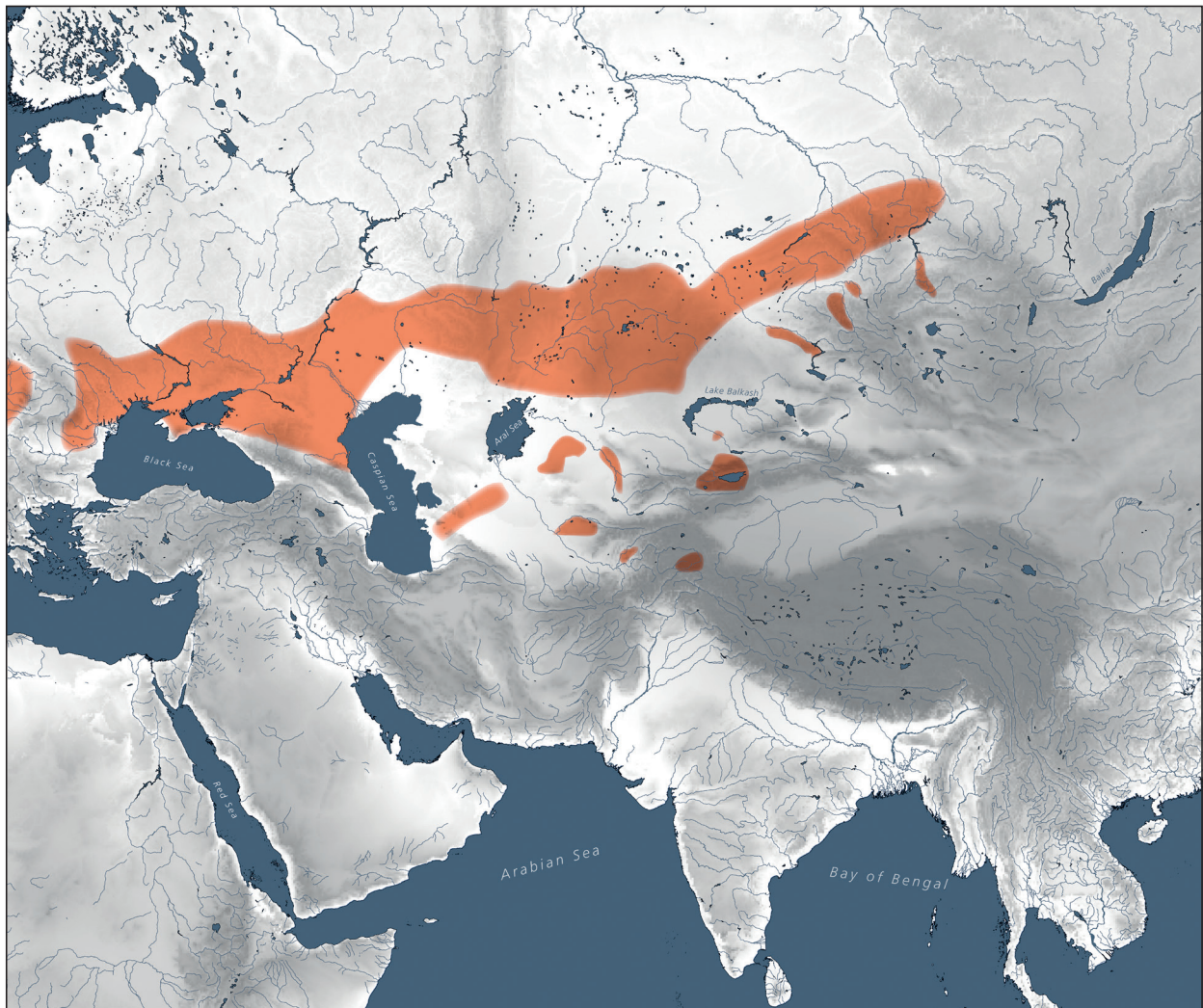


Fig. 1 Distribution of Iranian nomadic cultures on the Eurasian steppe during the Scythian/Sarmatian period. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

The decline of the Roman Empire and the region's conquest by the Huns could hardly lead to the disappearance of a population as large as the Sarmatians. This issue calls for detailed study because little is known about the Sarmatians of the 5th century and later. A few scattered references and a handful of archaeological finds from more recent excavations are the only telltale signs that a search for the »surviving« Sarmatians in the archaeological heritage of later peoples – Gepids, Langobards, Avars and ancient Hungarians – might not be an entirely futile exercise. Recent studies would suggest that the Iranian peoples, to which the Sarmatians also belonged, had a substantial cultural impact on the beliefs and arts, etc., of the ancient Hungarians. Set in a broader, European context, there is also increasing evidence that the Sarmatians played a major role in the emergence of medieval chivalry.

Despite their prominent role, the Sarmatians have remained a little-known people in both Hungary and Europe, not only among the educated public, but also in the scholarly community. One case in point is that even a comprehensive book such as *Magyarország története* (History of Hungary) published in 1984 is silent about the Sarmatians¹. We may therefore rightly assert that research on the Sarmatians has been neglected unfairly in Hungary. The situation is not much better in international archaeological research. In 1899, one of the then most outstanding scholars of Sarmatian/Alan studies remarked bitterly that German research took scant notice of these peoples². This situation has not changed during the past century. European archaeological and historical studies, by and large, tend to ignore the Sarmatians, the only exceptions being Russian and Ukrainian scholars. Sulimirski's book³ continues to be quoted as a seminal study, despite the fact that this book, an excellent overview in its own time, has become outdated during the past forty years. While several new overviews have been written⁴, these are not well-known. Alföldi's critical appraisal of the written sources on the Sarmatians of the Carpathian Basin remains an indispensable textbook⁵, but it cannot compensate for the lack of studies on the Sarmatians' history on the steppe and later, and even less stand as a substitute for a broad canvas incorporating the voluminous archaeological evidence.

It seems to us that the time is ripe for presenting a more detailed overview of the several millennia long history of the Iranian peoples of the steppe. The first chapter of this overview has already been written by Makkay⁶. The present volume covers another small chapter of this long history, namely the Sarmatians and Sarmatia. It is our sincere hope that similar overviews will appear of the periods and peoples not covered here. The history of the Sarmatians reaches back into the distant past (the 9th century BC) and to a faraway region (the Eurasian Steppe, extending to the Chinese border). The main emphasis will obviously be on the historical events taking place in the Carpathian Basin and on the archaeological finds from this region.

1 Magyarország 1984.

2 Kulakovskij 2000, 44.

3 Sulimirski 1970.

4 Lebedynsky 2002. – Kouznetsov/Lebedynsky 2005.

5 Alföldi 1942a.

6 Makkay 1998a, a revised and enlarged version of an earlier study.