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## THE INDO-SCYTHIANS: MASTER OF WAR AND THEIR WEAPONS IN GANDHARA

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### Abstract

*This article examines the military expertise of the Indo-Scythians, a coalition of nomadic tribes from Central Asia who held dominion over the northwestern territories of Gandhara and India during the period spanning from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century CE). Focusing on their expertise in warfare, the article studies the Indo-Scythians' reputation as skilled archers and formidable horse riders. It highlights their interactions and conflicts with the Indo-Greeks, Indo-Parthians, and Kushans shedding light on the Indo-Scythian wars and their impact on the geopolitical landscape of the time. Moreover, the article inspects the weapons utilized by the Indo-Scythian, showcasing their mastery of various arms and their significance in battle. Through an exploration of historical records, archaeological findings, and artistic representations, which aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Indo-Scythian military capabilities and the role of their formidable weapons in shaping their dominance in the Gandhara region.*

**Keywords:** War-Weapons, Military Expertise, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Greeks, Indo-Parthians, Gandhara, Punjab, Afghanistan, Archer

### Introduction

The Indo-Scythian, an amalgamation of nomadic tribes hailing from Central Asia, imprinted an enduring legacy across the northwestern territories of Gandhara and the Indian subcontinent

during the epoch spanning from the (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) to the advent of the (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) (Hysi, 2014; Waghmar, 2020; Golden, 2021: 39-89). Renowned for their martial prowess and wandering lifestyle, the Indo-Scythian civilization emerged as an imposing force of warriors, firmly asserting their dominion over the realm recognized as Gandhara, surrounding the contiguous regions of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan (Glenn, 2020; Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223). The Indo-Scythian were renowned for their martial expertise and the formidable weapons they exercised. With their exceptional skills as archers and skilled horse riders, they established themselves as a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield (Egerton, 2002). Their mastery of mounted warfare and archery granted them a distinct advantage over their adversaries, solidifying their reputation as matchless warriors (Egerton, 2002; Sheppard, 2020). Understanding the military capabilities of the Indo-Scythians necessitates an exploration of their interactions and conflicts with regional powers, most notably the Indo-Greeks the Kushan, and Indo-Parthians (Mitchiner, 1975: 391; Hanson, 2009; Morris, 2019: 381; Coloru, 2015: 173-199). These encounters shaped the geopolitical landscape of the time and provided perceptions of the Indo-Scythian military strategies (Pardesi, 2023: 284; Boga, & Ranjan, 2022: 313-353). Analyzing their engagements with these powers unveils the tactical approaches employed by the Indo-Scythian shedding light on their methods of warfare and their ability to navigate complex military situations (Kumar, 2019).

Central to the Indo-Scythian dominance was their utilization of formidable weapons. From their unparalleled archery skills to the deployment of various commotion weapons, their arsenal reflected their nomadic lifestyle and adaptability in combat (Sheppard, 2020). Through analyzing historical chronicles, archaeological discoveries, and artistic representations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the significance of these weapons and their role in shaping the Indo-Scythian military might. (Surendra, 2023; Flandrin, 2007). The martial achievements of the Indo-Scythians focused on their expertise in warfare and the formidable weapons that played a pivotal role in their success (Senior, 2001: 8; Kim, Vervaet, & Adali, 2017). Through the disconnection of their military capabilities and exploring their interactions with other powers, we can perceive the full extent of their influence and the lasting impact they had on the region's history (Nathan, & Scobell, 2015). The legacy of the Indo-Scythians as masters of war,

encouraged by their challenging weapons, remains enduring evidence of their place in ancient military history (Meyer, 2013).

Moreover, the weapons utilized by the Indo-Scythian, highlight their formidability and impact in battle. From their expertise in archery to the deployment of battle weapons such as swords and spears, the Indo-Scythian reserve imitated their nomadic lifestyle and their flexibility in various battle situations. Drawing from historical records, archaeological and artistic representations, we aim to unravel the significance of these weapons and their role in the Indo-Scythian military dominance (Singh, 2022). However, examining the Indo-Scythian martial capabilities and their formidable weapons, we gain insight into their rise as masters of war in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. Through an exploration of their military prowess, this article seeks to shed light on the enduring impact of the Indo-Scythian and their difficult weapons, coagulating their place in the annals of ancient warfare (Smith, 1999). The Indo-Scythian had interactions and conflicts with both the Indo-Greeks and the Parthians during their reign in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. The Greeks had established several kingdoms in the region, including the Seleucid Empire, which contained parts of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan (Singh, 2005: 1-34; Hoo, & Wiesehofer, 2022: 273-297).

The Indo-Scythian encountered the Greek kingdoms, particularly (Muhammad & Jan 2023: 212-223) in the area of Bactria (present-day northern Afghanistan and Punjab, and Sindh Pakistan). Maues, one of the early Indo-Scythian rulers, had conflicts with the Greeks. He waged wars against the Greek kingdoms in the region and successfully expanded his dominion (Tarn, 1902: 268-293). The most significant Indo-Scythian conflicts with the Greeks occurred during the reign of Demetrius-I, a powerful Indo-Greek king. Demetrius launched military campaigns against the Indo-Scythians, seeking to regain lost territories (Bernard, 1999: 110). These conflicts, known as the Indo-Greek Wars, took place during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Jakobsson, 2007: 51-90). The wars resulted in shifting control of territories between the Indo-Scythians and the Greeks (Widemann, 2003: 95-125; Dar, 2012: 245). The Parthian Empire, based in present-day Iran also had territorial interests in the regions where the Indo-Scythians ruled (Rezakhani, 2017). The interactions between the Indo-Scythians

and the Parthians led to intermittent conflicts. Mithradates- I, a Parthian king, launched military campaigns against the Indo-Scythian during the (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) (Haidary, 1999: 175). These conflicts, known as the Parthian-Scythian Wars, aimed to assert Parthian control in the region. The wars resulted in territorial gains and losses for both sides. Gondophares, an Indo-Scythian ruler, and Pacorus II, a Parthian king, were contemporary leaders who engaged in both conflicts and alliances. Gondophares sought the support of the Parthians to solidify his rule, while Pacorus-II aimed to maintain the Parthians' influence in the area. These Indo-Scythian wars with the Greeks and Parthians resulted in a complex geopolitical landscape in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. The territories often changed hands between these powers, leading to a dynamic and shifting balance of power in the region during that time (Bernard, 1999: 102-126).

### **Historical Background of the Indo-Scythian in Gandhara**

The Scythians, nomadic tribes, once crossed the extensive Eurasian steppes for numerous centuries, commencing around the (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and continuing until the (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) (Piotrovsky, 1973: 12-25; Khazanov, 2015: 32-49). The term "Eurasian steppes" denotes the vast plains stretching from Eastern Europe, encompassing Hungary, through Ukraine, Southern Russia, Central Asia, Mongolia, and South Siberia (Andreeva, 2018; Moon, 2020; Herbert, Nikolai, Karl-Georg, Barbara, Sergej, Alexander, & Frank, 2019: 5-71). These steppes served as the ancestral homeland and roaming grounds for the Scythians, who held significant sway and impact in the region during their migratory history (Khazanov, 2015: 32-49; Hanks, 2010: 469).

However, the Scythians society comprised distinct classes of warriors and herders who embraced the nomadic way of life (Harl, 2023; Cunliffe, 2019). They exhibited remarkable expertise in various crafts, such as the production of weapons, utilizing horses, and intricate metalwork (Harmatta, 1996: 182, Kumar, Madaan, & Bhargava, 2023: 965-975; Shomirzayev, & Yuldashov, 2021: 475-486).Linguistically, the Scythians conversed in an Iranian language, belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family, specifically situated in the eastern branch (Waldman & Mason, 2006: 720, Grigoriev, 2021; Boroujerdi, 2023: 1). The roots of the Scythians can be traced through archaeological evidence and written

sources. Initially, they settled in the eastern steppes, including the Tien Shan and the Altai Mountains, around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Gazerani, 2015: 32; Akcan, 2021: 263-275). In the (7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the Scythians sailed across the Caucasus and engaged with the Cimmerians in the Middle East. Their influence expanded, reaching the borders of Egypt alongside the Medes from the western Iranian Plateau (Beckwith, 2009: 49, Slatyer, 2012).

In (612 BCE), a coalition of Scythians and Medes successfully seized control of Nineveh, although the Scythians later lost their hold on Ways (Brosius, 2020). The Medes eventually pushed the Scythians back to the northern territories of the Caucasus. Around (600 BCE), the Scythians consisted of diverse groups and classes, including the Auchates, Catiaroi, Traspian, and Paralatae, collectively known as the Royal Scythians (Yildirim, 2017: 41). They emerged victorious over the Cimmerians along the northern coast of the Black Sea and established settlements in regions such as Moldova, Ukraine, and Crimea. In (512 BCE), during the reign of the Achaemenid ruler Darius I, conflicts erupted between the Scythians and Persians in the area north of the Black Sea. As a result, the Scythians expanded their empire westward, crossing the Danube River and reaching into Central and Eastern Europe (Grousset, 1970: 9; Melyukova, 1990: 108-109). Following their initial expansion, the Scythian people eventually splintered into two primary factions: the western Scythians and the eastern Scythians. In the (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) (Cunliffe, 2019: 132), Ateas, the ruler of the western Scythians, held dominion over the territory stretching from the Maeotian marches to the Danube. He sought to expand his empire further west but met his ultimate defeat at the hands of Philip- II of Macedon in (339 BCE) (Paron, 2021: 452).

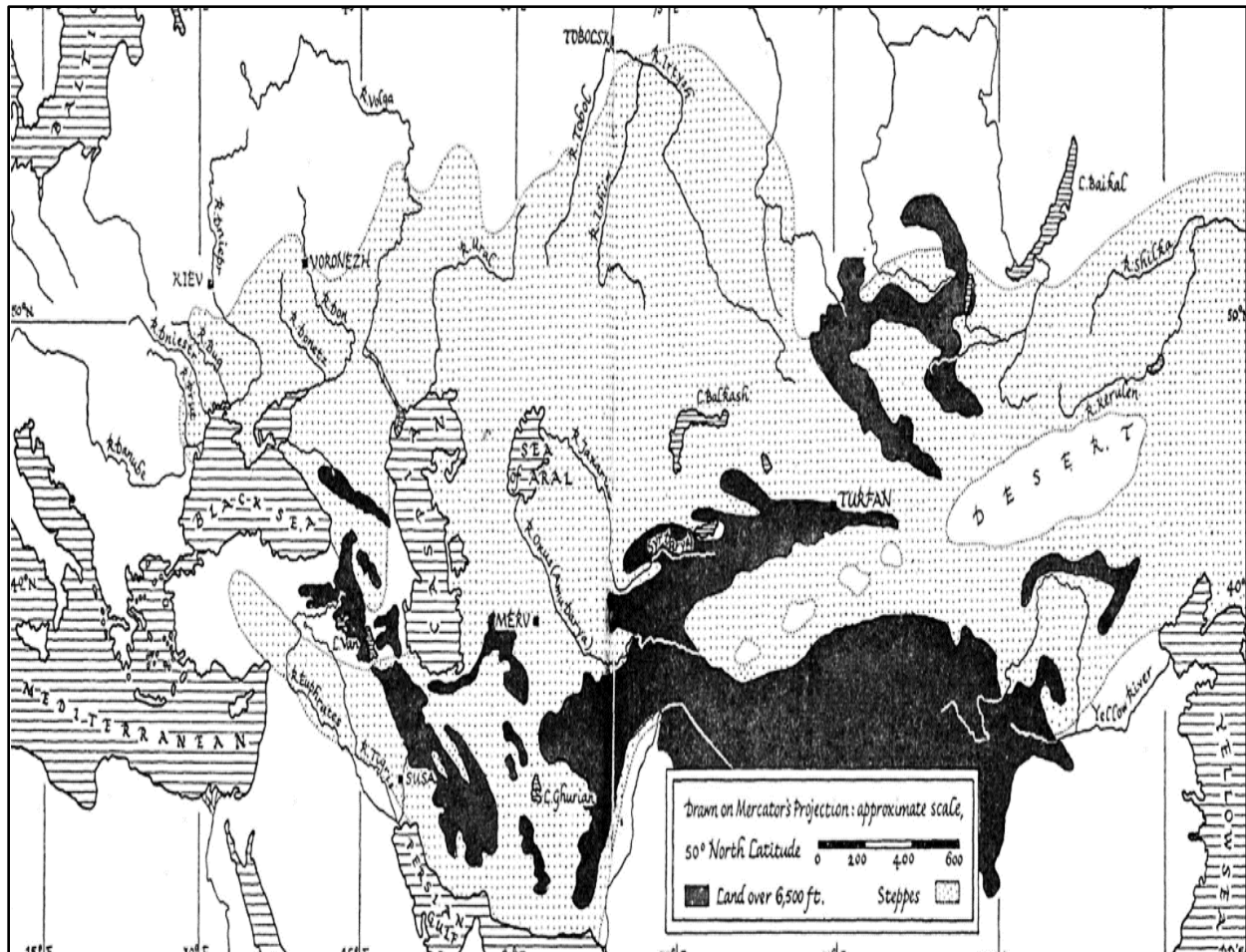


Figure: 1 Physical map of the territory of the Scythians' background and influence (after, T. T. Rice, 1957)

Over time, the western Scythians assimilated the Sarmatians, an Iranian people originating from Central Asia. It was during Alexander the Great's campaign against the Sarmatians in (329 BCE) that he encountered the Scythians (Sulimirski, 1985: 198; Stepanov, 2019: 116-190). On the other hand, the eastern Scythians faced an incursion by the Yueh-Chi tribe in the (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) (Pugachenkova, 1996: 1-38). Pressured to retreat from the shores of Lake Issikul, the eastern Scythians split into two distinct groups.

One group of Scythians undertook a migration to South Asia, earning the appellation "Indo-Scythian" (Edwardes, 1969: 23; Chopra, 2003: 114-115). Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, the eastern Scythian tribe, identified as the Sai by the Chinese, inhabited the Ili Basin close to Lake Issikul, situated on the eastern shores of the Jaxartes River. However, their peaceful coexistence was interrupted due to clashes with the Yue-Chi tribe (Majumdar, 1946: 56, Edwardes, 1969:

23). The Yue-Chi tribe itself had migrated from the western bank of the Huang-nu River in the contemporary province of Gansu, China. Expelled from Gansu by their rival nomadic tribe, the Hiung-nu, the Yue-Chi were compelled to move westward (Risley, 1908; Narain, 1957: 132-134). Following their defeat at the hands of the Yue-Chi, the Scythians were compelled to leave their homeland. They subsequently divided into two groups and migrated in different directions (Kochanowski, 1968: 27-47; Bhutani, 2000: 1-40, Senior, 2001: 8).

**I.** One of the Scythian southern groups embarked on a southern migration under the leadership of Mauesin 90/85 BCE. They crossed the Pamir region, made their way through the suspending pass, and eventually reached the Kashmir valley (Foltz, 1999; Wood, 2002; Kermani, & Siddiqui, 2017: 33-52). Upon their arrival in Pakistan, they began to settle in the foothills of Kashmir (Dani, 1986; Millward, 2021) and the Taxila region before moving further south to Punjab and the Hazara region. He ruled for 15 years and was followed by Azes-I, Azilises, and Azes-II (Senior, 2001: 8-9, Khalid, 2022, Authority, Party, Tehreek, Police, & Party, 2021; Qaisar, Ahmad, Ghani, & Ullah, 2022: 87-96; Faraz, Ali, & Sabir, 2023: 90-100).

**II.** The second western group of this dynasty, after being defeated by the Yueh-Chi, embarked on a migration toward the East (Mukherjee, 2011). They crossed the Oxus River and settled in Bactria (Mitchiner, 1975, Mairs, 2016:1-4, Lyonnet, & Dubova, 2020: 7-65). From there, they continued their expansion, reaching Aria and Margiana (including Herat), and eventually establishing their presence in Parthia (Mukherjee, 1975 Kaim, & Kornacka, 2016: 47-72; Holt, 2023).

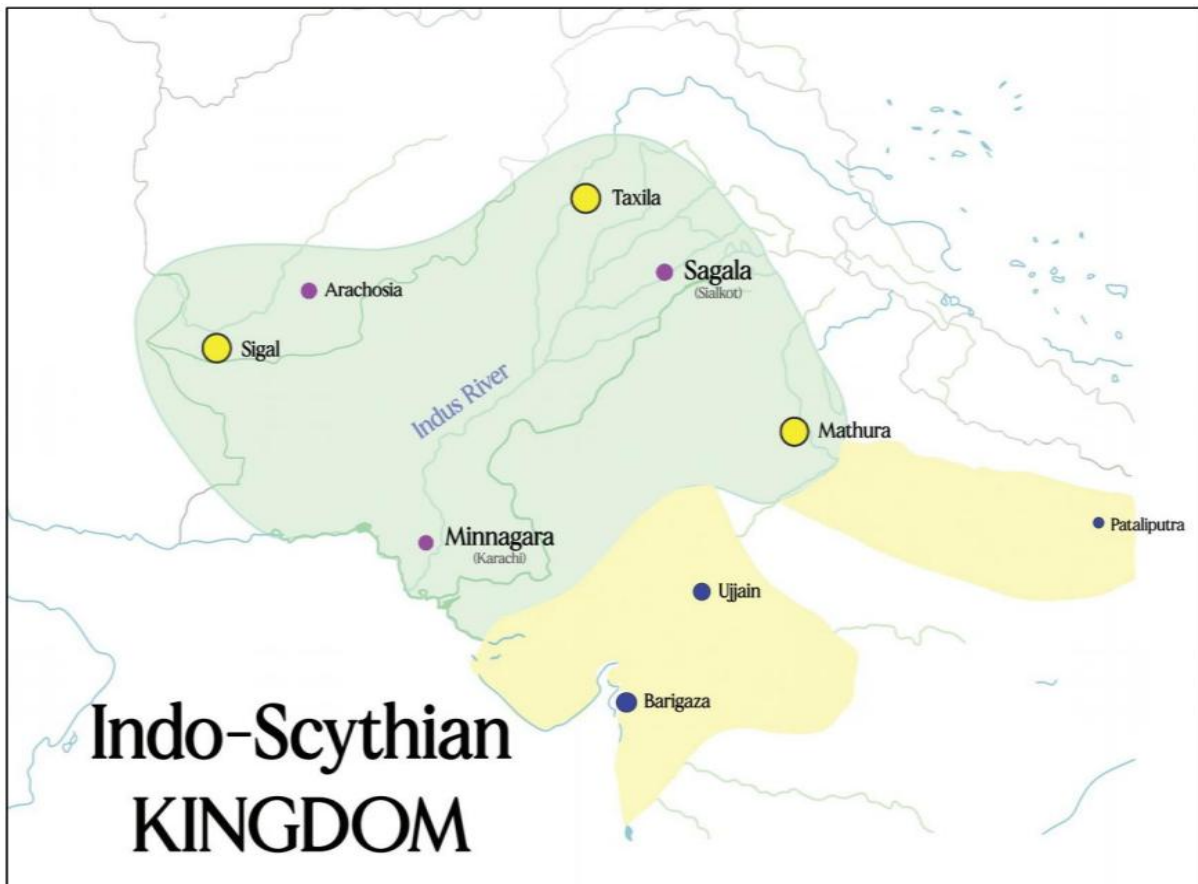


Figure: 2 Map showing Territorial Jurisdiction (Gandhara) of the Indo-Scythian (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE)

## Results and Discussion

The Indo-Scythian development was distinguished by its military ability and expertise in the art of warfare. They were a highly skilled troop of riding combatants who demonstrated exceptional proficiency in employing cavalry tactics, endowing them with a prominent edge in the battleground. Relying heavily on their cavalry in warfare, the Indo-Scythian were accomplished horsemen who displayed expertise in various equestrian techniques, such as mounted archery and rapid maneuvering, enabling them to assail their adversaries with celerity and precision. The exceptional mobility provided by their cavalry imparted them with a substantial advantage in engagements. The Indo-Scythians were particularly renowned for their adept utilization of composite bows. These composite bows were ingeniously crafted from an amalgamation of diverse materials, typically combining wood, horn, and sinew, which yielded a potent and flexible weapon. In comparison to simple wooden bows, the composite bows



employed by the Indo-Scythian displayed superior attributes, including an extended range and heightened accuracy. Employing sharp hit-and-run strategies, the Indo-Scythian warriors skillfully utilized their mobility and archery acumen to launch swift attacks on their adversaries, promptly withdrawing from the scene afterward. This tactical approach allowed them to execute worrying attacks and weaken larger enemy forces, effectively disrupting their formations and sapping their morale.

The Indo-Scythian civilization displayed profound competence in paramilitary warfare strategies. Their familiarity with the local topography allowed them to capitalize on natural obstacles and effectively employ ambush tactics. Employing surprise attacks, they would target defenseless enemy supply lines and isolated units, inflicting considerable damage with minimal risk. The Indo-Scythian warriors showcased remarkable adaptability, employing diverse strategies based on the prevailing circumstances. They exhibited a penchant for incorporating elements from various cultures, tailoring their tactics accordingly, which granted them a distinct advantage when confronting different adversaries and surmounting multifaceted challenges. In battle, the Indo-Scythian wielded an array of weapons and armor. Swords, spears, lances, daggers, knives, arrows, bows, and axes were utilized in close combat as well as while mounted on horseback. For protection without compromising mobility, they preferred lightweight and flexible armor, often fashioned from leather or scaled materials.

While specific details about Indo-Scythian military organizations remain scarce, it is gathered that a hierarchical structure was in place, with leaders occupying various levels of command. Apparently, chieftains or kings led their forces into battle, assisted by subordinate commanders who directed smaller units. The Indo-Scythian mastery of warfare can be attributed to their adept cavalry tactics, skilled equestrianism, adept operation of composite bows, and their aptitude for adapting to diverse combat scenarios. These distinctive attributes rendered them formidable opponents on the battlefield, contributing significantly to their military triumphs throughout their reign. The Indo-Scythians active a variety of weaponry that reflected the prevailing time and regional context. These weapons held immense significance in shaping their warfare tactics and were pivotal in bolstering their military accomplishments. Their proficiency

with these weapons played a crucial role in their decisive victory over the difficult Indo-Greek forces in the Gandhara region, subsequently establishing their dominion over the land for an extended period and expanding their empire to Mathura, India. The Indo-Scythians were particularly renowned for their exceptional expertise in handling composite bows. These bows were ingeniously crafted by amalgamating various materials, such as wood, horn, and sinew, to produce formidable and versatile weapons.

The combination of these materials allowed for a powerful, flexible, and accurate weapon with a longer range compared to simple wooden bows. Composite bows were effective in both mounted and infantry archery. Indo-Scythian swords were typically of the single-edged, curved variety. These swords were designed for slashing and cutting, allowing for quick and effective strikes in close combat. The blades were often made of iron and featured distinctive hilt designs. Spears were commonly used by the Indo-Scythians for thrusting attacks both on foot and while mounted. They provided a longer reach and were effective in penetrating enemy defenses. Indo-Scythian spears typically had a leaf-shaped blade and a wooden shaft. Lances were another important weapon used by the Indo-Scythians. The Indo-Scythian warriors were skilled in employing an array of long, thrusting weapons, primarily while mounted, enabling them to unleash forceful strikes from a distance. These lances boasted distinctive leaf-shaped or triangular heads, wielded with both hands to great effect.

In addition to their weapons, the Indo-Scythian flourished an assortment of axes, adept at cutting and chopping, boasting a single blade and either a wooden or metal handle. These axes proved highly effective in close combat scenarios, providing a formidable advantage against adversaries on foot or horseback. Augmenting their renowned composite bows, the Indo-Scythians made extensive use of arrows as their primary projectile armament. These arrows were expertly crafted from wood, often adorned with iron or bronze arrowheads, underscoring their emphasis on accuracy and versatility for both long-range and close-quarters engagements. Among their compact yet versatile armory, the Indo-Scythian carried dagger knives, adept at stabbing, slashing, and serving various utilitarian purposes. These daggers were commonly

secured on their belts or sheathed for easy access. It is important to note that the specific designs and attributes of Indo-Scythian weaponry exhibited variability, contingent upon factors such as the prevailing period, regional influences, and individual preferences. Comparable to other ancient cultures, the Indo-Scythians continuously adapted and refined their armaments, tailoring them to suit their tactical necessities and harnessing available materials and techniques to their advantage.

### **Conclusion**

The Indo-Scythian dynasty began in the (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) and after defeating the last Indo-Greek ruler, which led to the establishment of the Indo-Scythian dynasty. They were also called barbarians and experts in war, horse riding, and skilled archery, and within a short period, the Indo-Scythian extended their rule over a large territory in the northwestern region, stretching from Seistan in present-day Iran and Afghanistan to Gandhara in present-day Pakistan and Sindh in present-day Pakistan and Mathura, India to the Indus River. It is important to note here that they occupied a huge territory within a short period from Gandhara to Mathura (India). As the Indo-Scythian were experts in battle with their exceptional weapons, they easily defeated the Indo-Greeks and Indo-Parthian. They ruled in Gandhara and Pakistan from (90 BCE to 20) CE. The Indo-Scythian role as masters of war and their use of formidable weapons defined their presence in Gandhara and the broader Indian subcontinent. Due to their exceptional skills on the battlefield, they had convincingly defeated the mighty Indo-Greek in the region of Gandhara in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE under the tremendous leadership of Maues subsequently, in 57 BCE during the period of Azes-I, the ruler of the Indo-Scythian dynasty had once again defeated the Indo-Greek and occupied Gandhara till the arrival of the Indo-Parthian dynasty. Their nomadic origins, martial expertise, interactions with neighboring powers, weaponry, and lasting impact collectively highlight their significant place in history. The analysis of the Indo-Scythian military skill sheds light on their contribution to ancient warfare strategies and their influence on the regions they inhabited.

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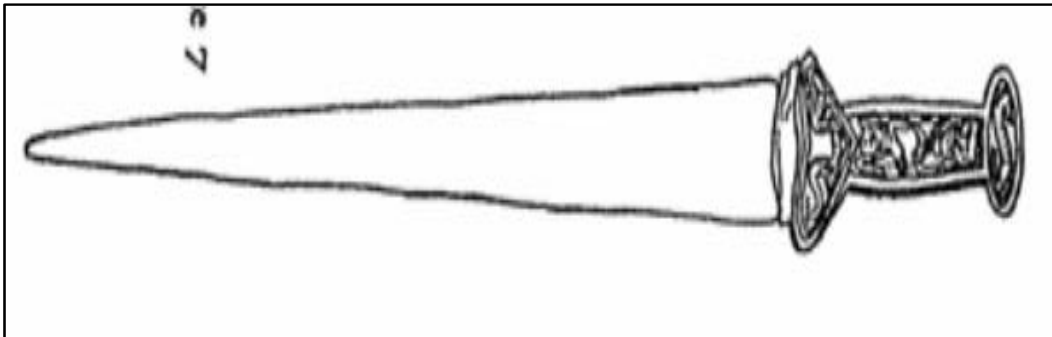


Plate: 1 Showing a Sword from Chertomlyk (after Minns, 1913)



Plate: 2 Showing Axe with long handle and depiction of animal (after Farkas, 1975)



Plate: 3 showing the camel image on the handle of a decorated dagger, (after Schiltz 2008)

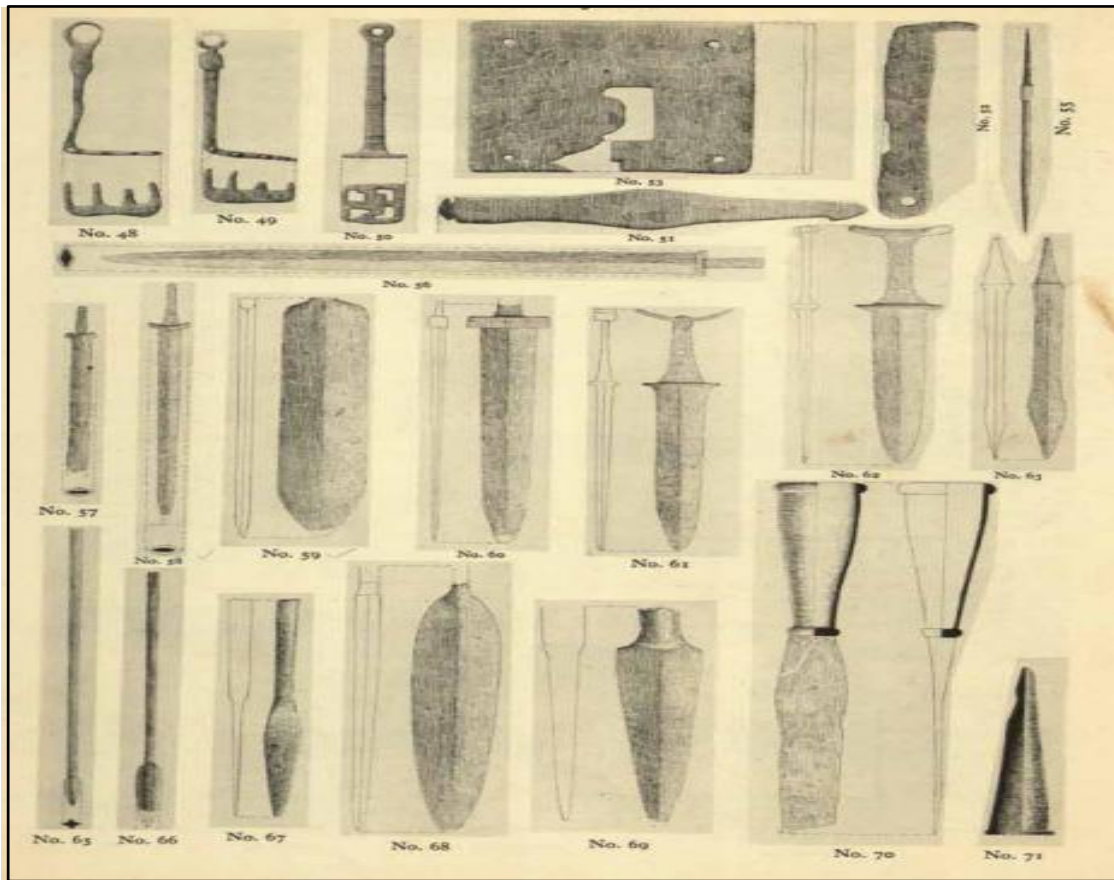


Plate: 4 Iron objects (Swords, daggers, and tools), Sirkap, Taxila (Marshall, 1912)

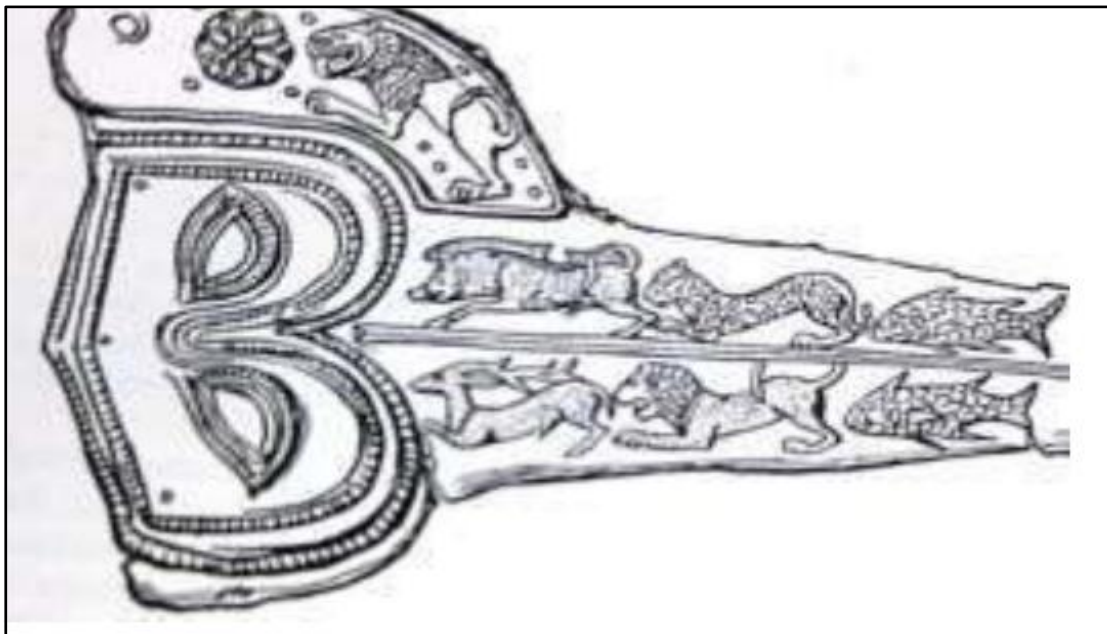


Plate: 5 Handle of a gold dagger with a hunting scene of different animals from Chertomlyk (after Minns, 1913)



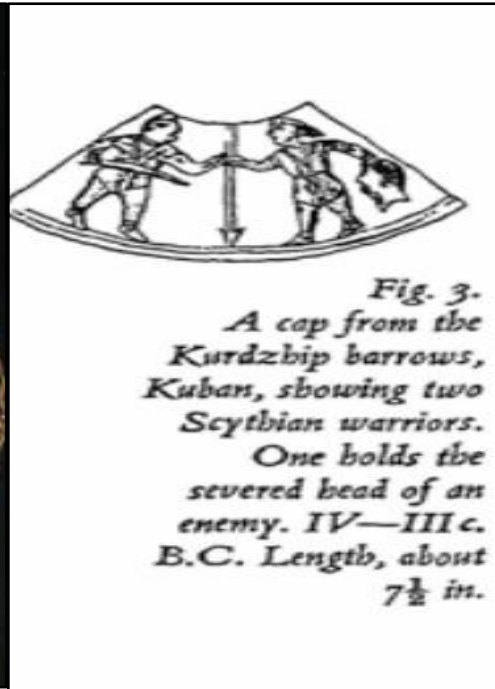


Fig. 3.  
A cap from the  
Kurdzbiq barrows,  
Kuban, showing two  
Scythian warriors.  
One holds the  
severed head of an  
enemy. IV—III c.  
B.C. Length, about  
7½ in.

Plate: 6 Scythians ritual vessels depicted warriors from Kul Oba, (after Farkas, 1975)



Plate: 7 Scythian king with a dagger in complete from profile, (after Chang, 2012)

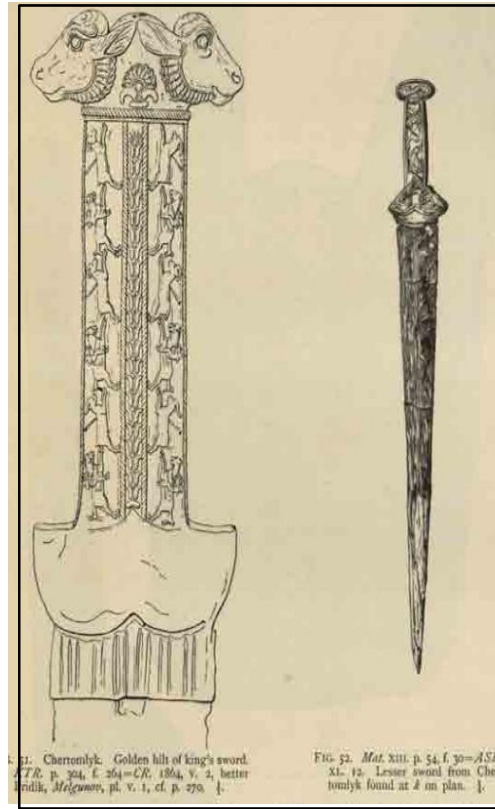


Fig. 51. Chertomlyk. Golden hilt of king's sword. *ATR*, p. 304, f. 264—*CR*, 1964, v. 2, better. *Brick, Melgunov*, pt. v. 1, cf. p. 270. f. .  
Fig. 52. *Mat* XIII, p. 54, f. 30—*AST*, XI, 12. Lesser sword from Chertomlyk found at 2 on plan. .

Plate: 8 A Sword with Animals' depiction Chertomlyk (after Minns, 1913)

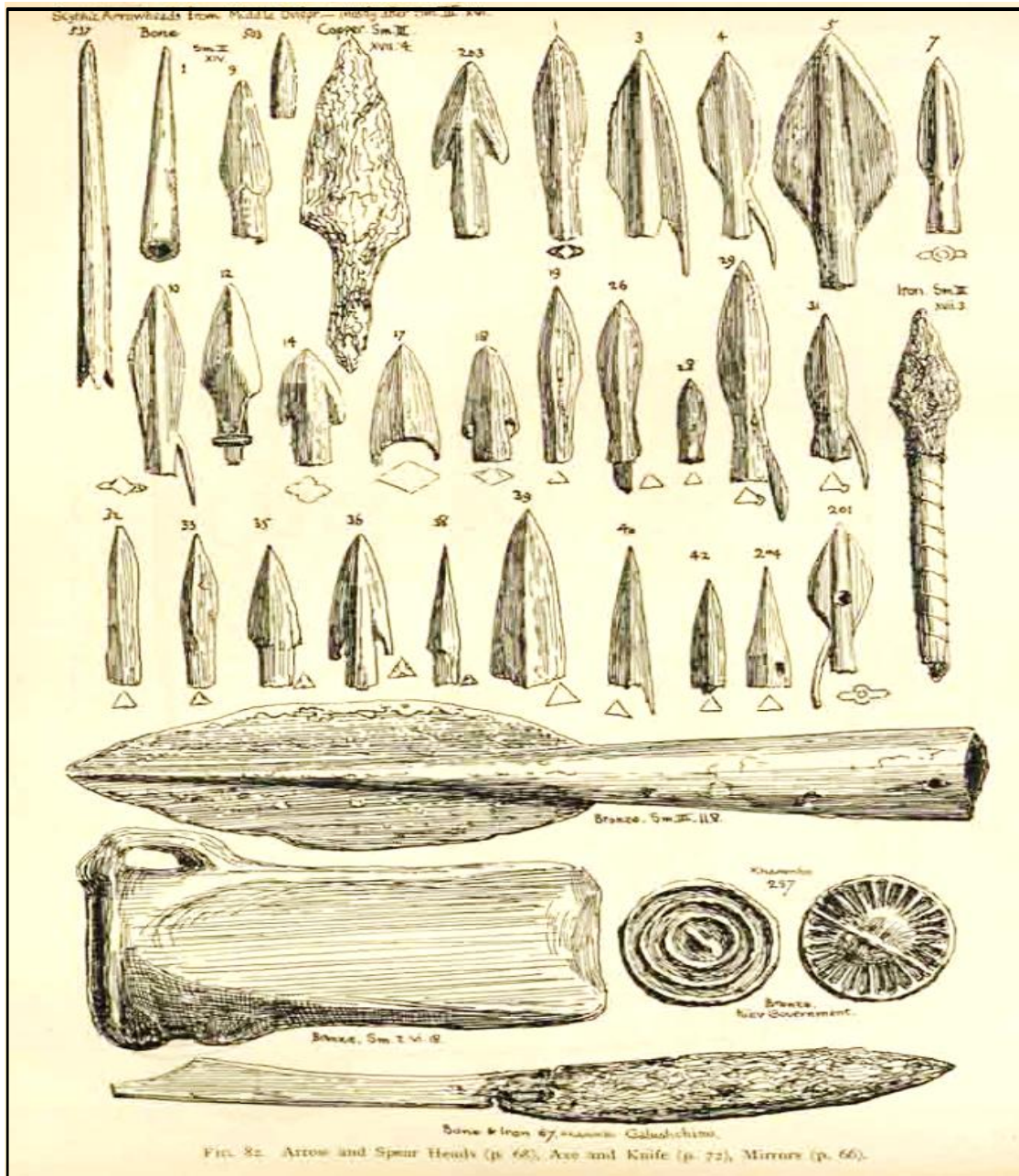


Plate: 9 shows different bronze knives and daggers, (after Minns, 1913)

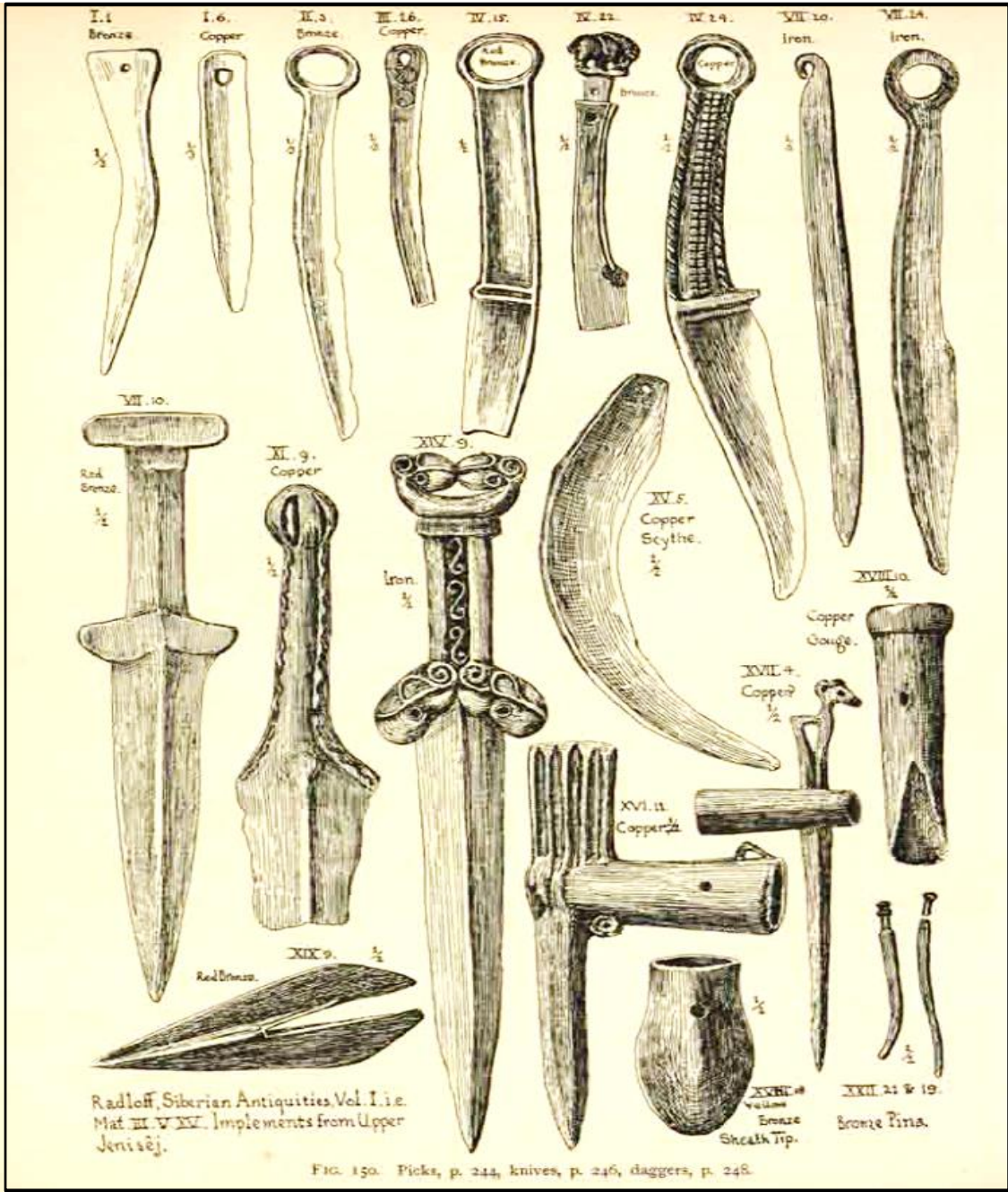


Plate: 10 showing different bronzedaggers, knives and cutting tools, (after Minns, 1913)

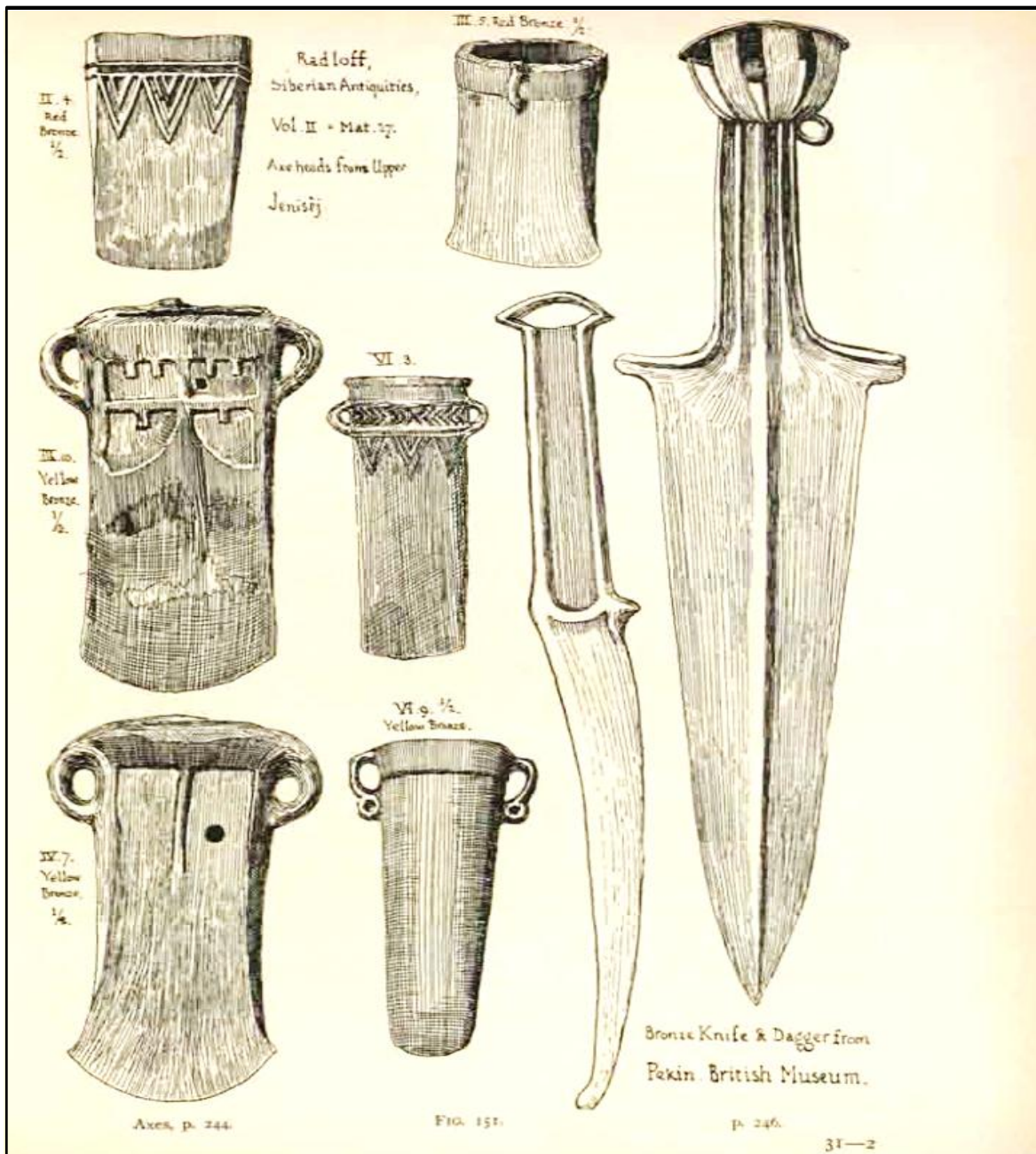


Plate: 11 shows the chief types of bronze tools and weapons, (after Minns, 1913)



Plate: 12 showing different bronze knives handles and cutting tools, (after Minns, 1913)

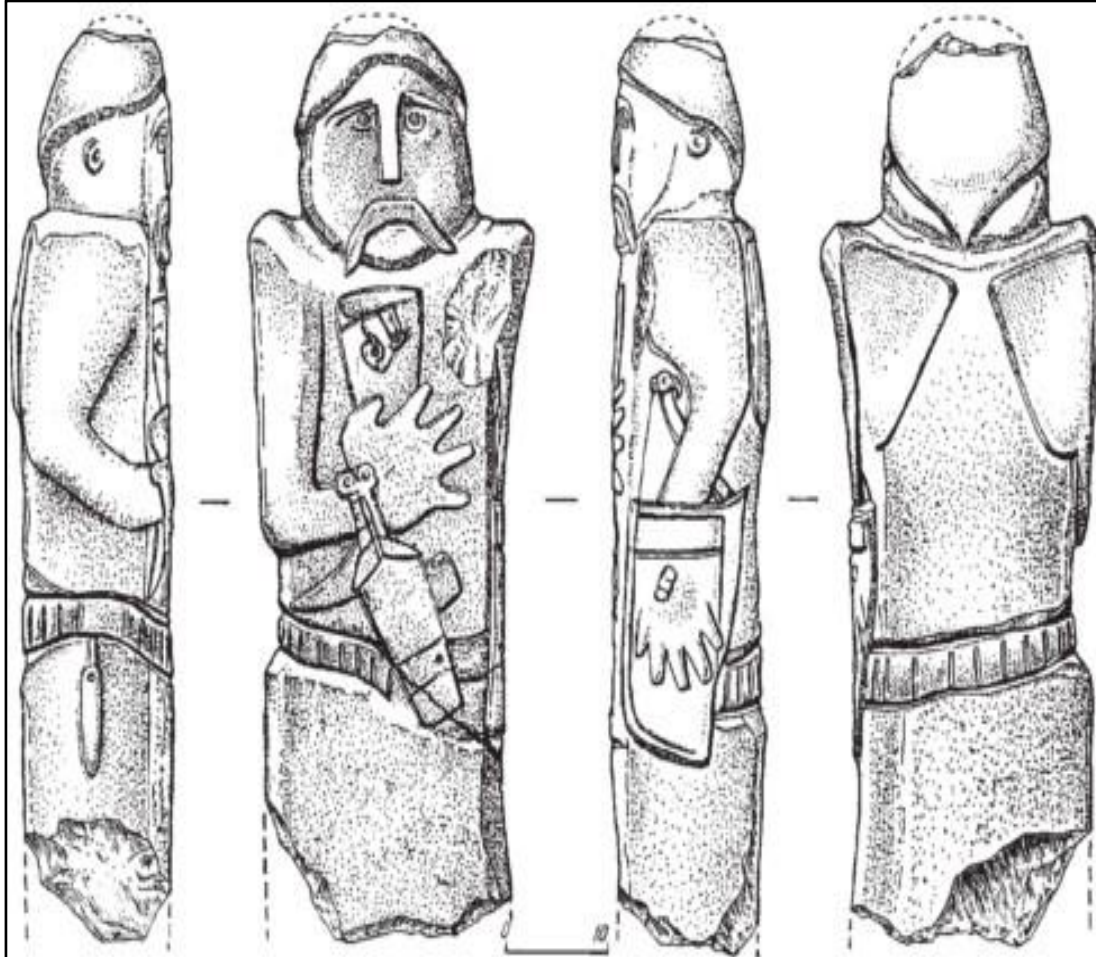


Plate: 13 showing Scythian warriors with weapons (after Chang, 2012)

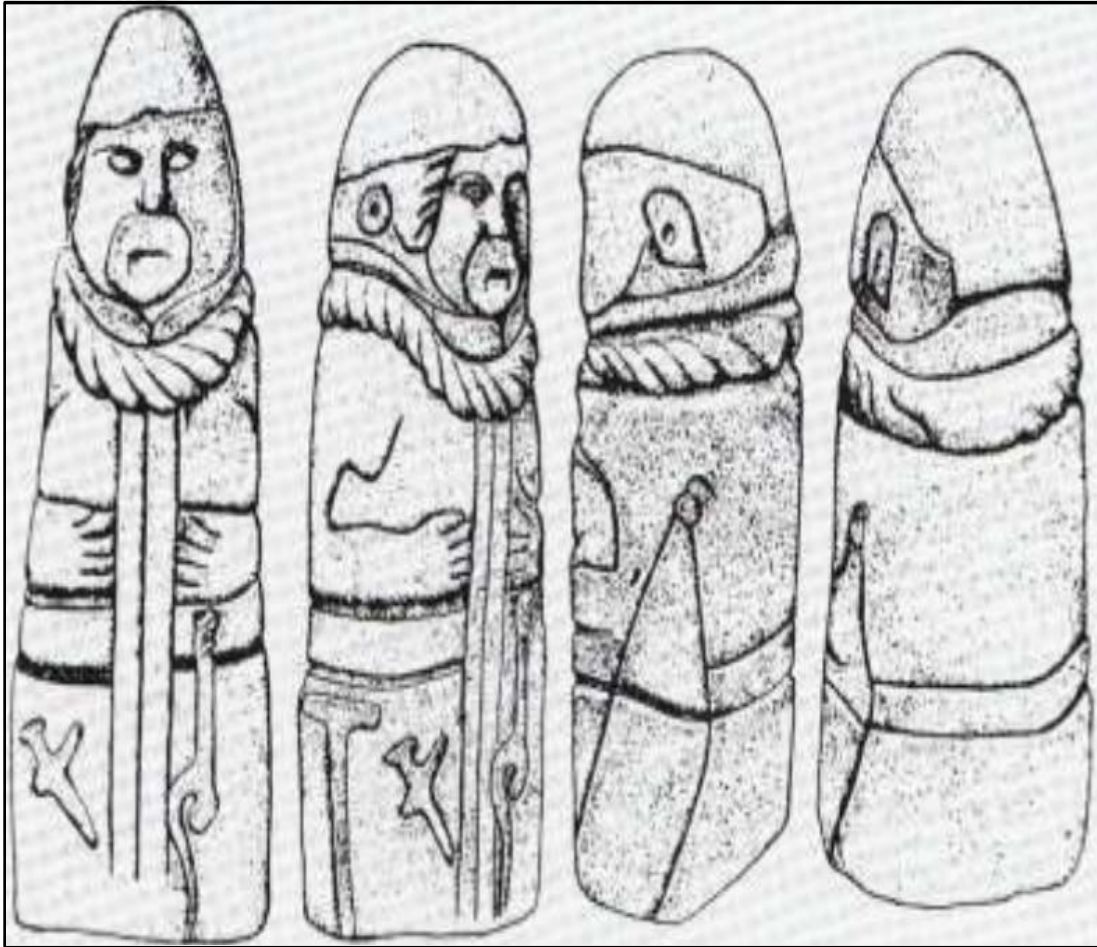


Plate: 14 Stone figure of Scythian warriors with weapons (after Rolle, 2006)



Plate: 15 Scythian stone steles from Ternivka, Ukraine (After Olchovsky and Evdokimov, 1994)



Plate: 16 Scythian archer, Greek red-figure vase, the British Museum(Trustees of the British Museum)



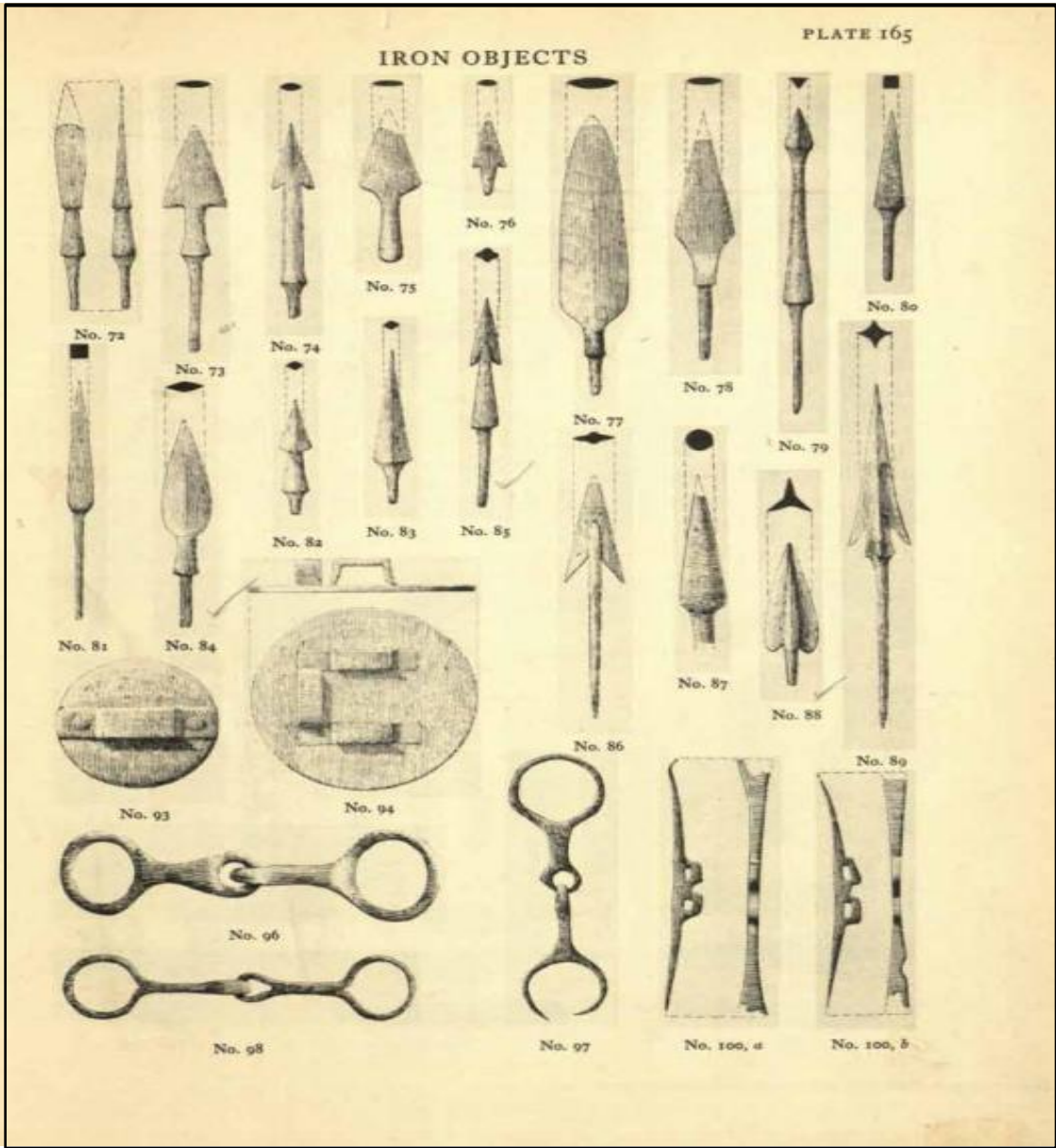


Plate: 17 Iron objects arrowheads, shields, and Sirkap, Taxila (Marshall, 1912)

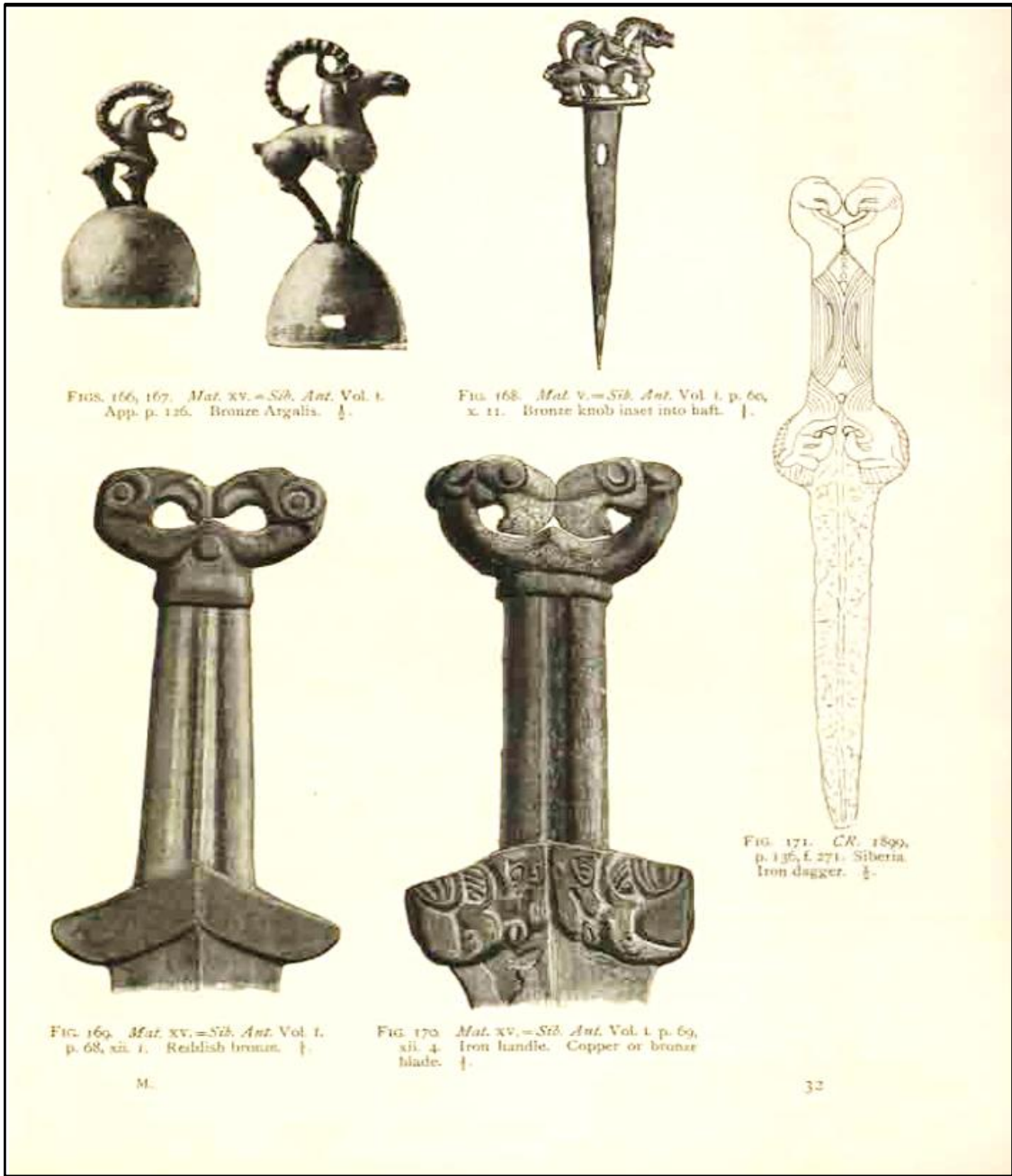


Plate: 18 showing the Iron handles of different swords with animal designs (after Minns, 1913)



Plate: 19 Scythian warrior on gold helmet from Peredriyiva Mohyla, (Courtesy Dr. Sergei Polin, Institute of Archaeology of Ukraine)