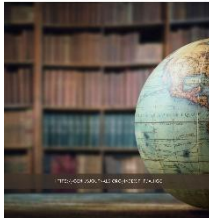


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# The Reflection Of The History And Culture Of The Early Aral Sea Saka Tribes In Written And Archaeological Sources.

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a systematic analysis of how the history and culture of the early Aral Sea Saka tribes are reflected in ancient written and epigraphic sources. The research comprehensively examines data ranging from the Zoroastrian sacred text, the Avesta, and epic traditions to the cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenid dynasty and accounts by classical authors. It elucidates the semantic and etymological genesis of the ethnonym "Sakā", evaluates long-debated totemic theories in scholarship, and explores the ethno-cultural proximity between the Sakas and ancient Khorezmians regarding garments, weaponry, and attributes. Furthermore, through a comparative source analysis, the study evaluates the geopolitical prominence of the Saka communities as a northeastern satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire and examines their role as equal allies in the Greco-Persian Wars and the campaigns of Alexander the Great. By cross-referencing and comparing written records with the archaeological data from the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (KAEE), this study integrates reliable data into a cohesive and objective historical framework.

## Keywords:

Early Sakas, Aral Sea region, Achaemenid epigraphy, Avesta, Herodotus, cuneiform inscriptions, ethnonyms, Saka-Khorezmian proximity, ancient hydrography, geopolitical status

## Introduction

Conceptual changes taking place in the archaeology of the Eurasian steppe regions necessitate a reevaluation of the Aral Sea region as one of the primary centers in the formation of Early Iron Age civilizations. The collapse of the long-dominant theory of "unidirectional Scythian expansion" and the realization that elements of the "animal style", weaponry, and horse harnesses emerged chronologically earlier precisely in the Eastern regions-particularly among the Aral Sea Sakas-underscore the urgency of researching this topic based on modern methodological principles.

The culture of the early Aral Sea Sakas is of strategic importance not only for regional

history but also for understanding the ethno-cultural processes at the crossroads of ancient world civilizations. Tangible evidence discovered at key sites such as Southern Tagisken, Uygarak, and related monuments proves that the Saka tribes followed a unique evolutionary path independent of western influences. This creates a fundamental need to review the history of the early Sakas based on a comprehensive analysis of archaeological, written, and visual sources.

## Literature review.

The earliest mythological and historical-geographical conceptions regarding the nomadic tribes of Central Asia were studied within the framework of the sacred book of

Zoroastrianism, the Avesta, and regional folk epic traditions. In the Avestan texts, the nomads are referred to under the name “Tur”, reflecting the complex socio-economic and ideological contradictions between pastoralist Turs and sedentary Iranians [1, p. 17]. These ancient epic layers were later extensively analyzed from both artistic and historical perspectives in Abulkasym Firdowsi's monumental work, the *Shahnameh* [3, p. 142]. The earliest official documentary evidence concerning the early Saka tribes is recorded in ancient Persian cuneiform inscriptions from Bisitun, Naqsh-e Rostam, Susa, and Hamadan under the terminological form “Sakā,” and their linguistic and toponymic transformations have been thoroughly investigated by I.M. Oransky [2, p. 14]. Furthermore, the geopolitical prominence of the Saka communities in the inscriptions of Darius I and their classification systems based on specific attire and ritual characteristics have been analyzed by researchers such as A. Sagdullaev [4, p. 32] and A.V. Edakov [5, p. 91]. The origin and etymological foundation of the ethnonym “Saka” remain highly controversial in scientific literature, dividing scholarship into several conceptual directions. Representatives of the first direction, including H.W. Bailey [6, p. 133], R. Frye [7, p. 69], and B.A. Litvinsky [8, p. 156], connect the term to the ancient Iranian root “sak” (meaning to be strong or swift), interpreting the ethnonym as “man” or “male/warrior.” In the second direction, the “totemistic” theory put forward by V.I. Abaev is predominant. Abaev links the word “Saka” to the ancient Iranian *sāka*—meaning “deer” (preserved in modern Ossetian as “sag”)—and correlates it with the central role of deer imagery in Scythian-Saka “animal style” art [9]. Critically analyzing these perspectives, I.M. Dyakonov considered Abaev's etymology to be phonetically artificial, arguing that ethnonyms should be linked to social stratification or territorial characteristics rather than animal names [10, p. 148]. Similarly, the linguist O.N. Trubachev criticized the over-reliance on Ossetian data, demonstrating that within the common Indo-European linguistic layer, the word “sak” is closer in meaning to “ally,” “companion,” or “associate” [11, p. 72]. On the

other hand, M.A. Dandamaev and S.A. Yatsenko [12, p. 115] evaluated the ethnonym “Saka” primarily as an exonym—an external designation applied to them by neighboring civilizations. Data regarding the Aral Sea population in the works of Herodotus, along with descriptions of Saka weaponry and their military roles within the Achaemenid army and during the campaigns of Alexander the Great, have been extensively studied by B.A. Litvinsky, I.V. P'yankov [13, p. 36], and R. Suleimanov [14, p. 14]. Furthermore, the architectural reliefs of the palace complexes of Darius I and Xerxes at Persepolis, which depict the ethno-cultural proximity and unique privileges of the Sakas and Khorezmians to be represented with arms, have been examined in detail by D. Wilber [15, p. 70].

### **Research Methodology.**

The methodological foundation of this study is built upon fundamental scientific principles, including historicity, objectivity, and a systemic approach, which ensure unbiased evaluation in the study of ancient civilizations and nomadic societies. To investigate the academic scholarship on the material and spiritual culture of the early Aral Sea Saka tribes and to analyze their representation in written and archaeological sources, a complementary matrix of interdisciplinary methods was deployed.

### **Analysis and results.**

Because nomadic pastoralist tribes occupied a strategic position in the socio-economic and military-political life of the ancient world, rich written sources regarding their lifestyle and interactions with sedentary civilizations have been preserved. The oldest data concerning Central Asian nomads appears in the Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism [1]. In this source, the nomadic tribes are referred to under the name “Tur”, capturing the intricate and frequently conflictual relations between pastoralist Turs and sedentary Iranians [2]. These ancient epic layers and the clashes between the two civilizations were later broadly adapted from both artistic and historical perspectives in Abulkasym Firdowsi's monumental work, the *Shahnameh* [3]. These ancient strata in the Avesta and epic traditions were subsequently augmented with

concrete historical and ethnographic facts in the official state epigraphy of the subsequent period. Specifically, the earliest documentary evidence regarding the nomadic pastoralist Saka tribes inhabiting the Central Asian steppe zones, including the Aral Sea region, is recorded in ancient epigraphic monuments, particularly in the Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions from the Achaemenid dynasty (late 6th to 5th centuries BC) under the terminological form “Sakā.”

According to the linguistic research of the eminent Iranian scholar I.M. Oransky, the semantic genesis of this term underwent a unique, stage-by-stage evolution. The researcher demonstrates that in its initial phase of utilization, the term designated a specific geographical space or administrative-territorial unit, carrying meanings equivalent to “homeland,” “region,” or “country” [2].

Over time, its functional scope expanded as it transformed into the collective name for the confederation of tribes inhabiting that territory. Consequently, the concept of “Sakā” underwent an ethno-historical transformation, evolving first from a toponym into a stable ethnonym. The trilingual inscriptions of Darius I on the Behistun cliffs (522–521 BC) represent one of the most vital official documentary sources for studying Saka history. In the introduction to the inscriptions, Darius I enumerates the 23 countries and provinces subject to him (such as Elam, Babylon, Media, and others). Within this list, the territory inhabited by the nomads is referred to as “Sakā,” confirming that the term originally denoted a specific administrative-territorial entity [16].

In other sections of the source, the mention of the “Sakā” territory alongside provinces that rebelled against the central authority and “broke away” (including Parthia and Margiana) clearly highlights the status of this region as an active political subject [16].

These epigraphic records are of fundamental importance for determining the position of the Saka tribes of the Aral Sea and adjacent zones within the political system of the Achaemenid Empire, as well as their dynamic relationship with imperial state structures.

Official inscriptions from the Achaemenid era reflect not only the geopolitical position of the Saka tribes but also their territorial distribution and distinct ethno-cultural features. For instance, in the Hamadan inscriptions, when describing the vast borders of the empire of Darius I, the land of the Sakas is indicated as a key anchor point on the northeastern frontier: “From the Saka land which is beyond Sogdiana, as far as Ethiopia; from India as far as Lydia” [16].

In this context, the term “Sakā” was used in the sense of a major territorial-political unit within the imperial administrative apparatus. However, over time, a clear trend toward differentiating (separating) the Saka tribes based on their external appearance and religious beliefs emerged within Achaemenid epigraphy. In the Naqsh-e Rostam cliff inscriptions of Darius I, the Sakas are explicitly subdivided into three major groups:

Sakā tigraxaudā — the Sakas who wear pointed felt caps;

Sakā haumavarkā — the Sakas who respect (or prepare) the sacred haoma beverage;

Sakā tyaiy paradraya — the Sakas who dwell beyond the sea or river [4].

Regarding the geographical localization of these tribes, the inscriptions on the statue of Darius I discovered in Susa provide significant scientific value. The text directly connects the location of the Sakas with the Khorezm region, recording it as: “After Khorezm, the Sakas of the land of marshes and soil.” This description is highly valuable because it accurately reflects the ancient hydrographic landscape of the Aral Sea region, specifically the ecological environment consisting of marshes, wetlands, and reedbeds in the deltas of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers [5].

Achaemenid sources thus provide documentary proof of the historical process wherein the concept of “Sakā” transformed from a general regional name (toponym) into distinct ethno-cultural and geographical groups (ethnonyms). The origin and etymological foundation of the ethnonym “Saka” remain highly controversial in scientific literature. This problem has been thoroughly investigated by prominent specialists such as H.W. Bailey, R.

Frye, V.I. Abaev, B.A. Litvinsky, and I.M. Oransky. Specifically, H.W. Bailey connected the term “Saka” to the ancient Iranian root “sak” (meaning to be strong or swift), interpreting it as “man” or “male” [6]. While this theory was supported by R. Frye [7], I.M. Oransky considered this etymological foundation to be highly reliable from a scientific standpoint [2]. Comprehensive data regarding this matter is also presented in the monographic research of B.A. Litvinsky [8].

Additional scientific theories regarding the origin of the ethnonym “Saka” do not limit its etymology merely to the meanings of “strong” or “man,” but explore other linguistic interpretations as well. The “totemistic” theory and etymological analysis put forward by V.I. Abaev has gained widespread scientific recognition. He links the word “Saka” to the ancient Iranian word *sāka*—meaning “deer.” In modern Ossetian, a deer is still referred to as “sag.”

In the material culture of the Scythian-Saka kurgans, deer imagery occupies a central place in the famous “animal style” art, suggesting that the deer may have functioned as a sacred tribal totem and protector [9]. The eminent scholar I.M. Dyakonov considered Abaev’s etymology to be somewhat artificial. In his view, the Ossetian word *sag* might have emerged not from the ancient Iranian word *sāka*, but as a result of alternative phonetic developments. Dyakonov favored linking the origin of ethnonyms with social stratification or regional markers rather than animal names [10].

Analyzing Scythian-Saka ethnonyms, the prominent linguist O.N. Trubachev criticized Abaev’s over-reliance on Ossetian linguistic data. He argued that the word “sak” belongs to a broader Indo-European linguistic stratum, with its root meaning being closer to “ally,” “companion,” or “associate” rather than an animal designation [11].

Certain archaeologists, such as S.A. Yatsenko, point out that although deer depictions are highly frequent in the “animal style,” it does not imply a universal totem for all Saka tribes. Deer imagery is common not only among the Sakas but also among Scythians, Savromats, and various other cultures. Different Saka groups

expressed their specific tribal identity through clothing styles or religious rituals rather than animal names [12].

The Iranian scholar M.A. Dandamaev considered the ethnonym “Saka” primarily as an exonym—an external designation applied to them by neighboring civilizations (Persians and Greeks). If it was indeed an externally applied name, the likelihood of it being rooted in an internal tribal totem decreases [17]. Furthermore, some orientalist have attempted to connect the word “saka” with the concept of the “dog,” which was considered a totem among nomadic tribes, drawing comparisons with the Mongol tribal designation *Nogai* (derived from the Mongolian word for dog) [7].

However, it is prudent to account for the immense chronological gap between the history of the Sakas and the Mongol period. The centuries-long distance between the formation eras of the Saka and Mongol tribes indicates that such a linguistic parallel is merely coincidental or scientifically unsubstantiated.

### **Conclusion.**

Investigating the history and culture of the early Aral Sea Saka tribes through the prism of ancient written and epigraphic sources allows for the formulation of the following scientific conclusions:

**Semantic and Conceptual Evolution:** The comprehensive body of written sources, particularly the analysis of official cuneiform inscriptions from the Achaemenid period, documentarily substantiates the stable conceptual evolution of the term “*Sakā*” in scholarship. While the designation initially functioned as a toponym to denote a specific geographical space and administrative-territorial entity during its earliest phase of usage, its functional-semantic scope subsequently expanded, transforming into a stable collective name (ethnonym) for the confederation of tribes inhabiting the steppe zone.

**Linguistic and Etymological Diversity:** The linguistic foundation of the ethnonym “Saka” is characterized by the absence of a unified consensus in global oriental studies. The socio-semantic direction advanced by H.W. Bailey and R. Frye defines the term in the sense of “strong,

male/warrior,” whereas V.I. Abaev’s totemistic theory based on the concept of *sāka* uncovers the mythological roots of nomadic artistic thought, particularly within Scythian-Saka “animal style” art. Concurrently, the critical models of I.M. Dyakonov and O.N. Trubachev demonstrate a structural correlation between the ethnonym and markers of social stratification, regional characteristics, or the Indo-European linguistic stratum signifying “ally” or “companion.”

**Territorial Differentiation and Geopolitical Status:** Official state epigraphy from the Achaemenid Empire firmly documents the calculated territorial-ethnographic differentiation of Saka communities based on their material culture, attire, external appearance, and ritual traditions (*Sakā tigraxaudā*, *Sakā haumavarkā*, *Sakā tyaiy paradraya*). The precise mutuality between the description of the “Sakas of the land of marshes and soil” in the Susa cliff inscriptions and the ancient hydrographic landscape of the Aral Sea deltaic zones proves that the Achaemenid administration was thoroughly and accurately informed regarding the regional ethnogeography.

**Ethno-Cultural Proximity and Visual Synthesis:** Classical accounts preserved in the works of Strabo, which classify the ancient Khorezmians within the broader Saka-Massaget ethnic and cultural sphere, find robust scientific validation through the iconographic analysis of architectural reliefs at Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam. The identical representation of garments, pointed headwear, and weaponry among the Khorezmians matches the diagnostic attributes of the Saka tribes, confirming that the populations of the sedentary oases and the steppe periphery emerged from a unified ethnocultural and genetic arena.

**Military Capability and Sovereign Alliance Status:** The analysis of classical histories by Herodotus and Arrian highlights that the Sakas operated as a primary strategic shock force within the Achaemenid military apparatus, serving in elite imperial garrisons in distant regions such as Egypt and Babylon. By the time of Alexander the Great’s campaigns, the participation of the Saka cavalry at the Battle of

Gaugamela not as subordinate vassals but as independent, equal allies of Darius III, alongside their collaboration with the Sogdian leader Spitamen to completely annihilate the Macedonian forces along the Polytimetus River, bears witness to the immense geopolitical prominence of these steppe nomads in the ancient world.

In conclusion, synthesizing the critical textual analysis of written records concerning the early Aral Sea Saka tribes with the material culture data unearthed by the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (KAEE) provides the foundational framework necessary to elevate fragmented information into a cohesive historical system. This interdisciplinary integration scientifically validates that as early as the Early Iron Age, the Aral Sea region functioned as a dynamic epicenter of complex inter-tribal integration and transregional historical processes.

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