

Up from the Ice – a Look at Dress in the Iron Age Altai

Liudmilla L. Barkova and Natal'ia V. Polos'mak. *Kostium i tekstil' pazyryktsev Altaia (IV–III vv. do n.e.)* [Costume and Textiles of the Altai Pazyryks (4th–3rd centuries BCE)]. Novosibirsk: InFolio, 2005. 232 pp. ISBN 5-89590-051-8.

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Archaeological textiles hold a unique place in the study of material culture. They are highly iterative – a record of forms that require frequent replacement in life. They communicate style, which is a dynamic process, and they are made from highly ephemeral materials. Thus, the chance finds of several fully-outfitted sets of complete garment from the frozen tombs of the Altai represent an extremely valuable record of past human existence. It is befitting that these remains have a dedicated and accessible volume of high-level scholarship.

The study of archaeological textiles requires a great deal of technical prowess and background in several simultaneously specialist fields. However, through this dauntingly trained specialization we can reconstruct past textile production and use. Because textiles and dress are natural vehicles for generating (and reinventing) genre, aesthetic, and valuation, they are a finely tuned record of critical social processes – offering an intimate understanding of important social phenomena: cultural demarcation, regionalization, the expression of social boundaries.

Since the publication of the famous tombs at Pazyryk (Rudenko 1953, 1970), scholarly debate has centered around the cultural provenance of objects in the kurgans and dating (e. g., Lerner 1991; Robinson 1990; Böhmer and Thompson 1991). The focus of this study is different. This volume examines the textiles, the complete male and female dress and accoutrement of the interred as well as horse dressage including a variety of decorated felts. The approach here is not only technical but also encompasses a kind of formal analysis, offering the reader a

way of understanding identity and place in Pazyryk culture. By investigating this unique body of artifacts in such a manner, it allows us to explore notions of social space within the worldview of the Pazyryk Altai. This is done by differentiating specific aspects of inherently local Iron Age material culture from more universal, pan-Eurasian aspects of style as expressed in felt objects, and in garment form, design and decorative details. These important details are now more fully evident thanks, in no small part, to the faithful and painstaking (decades-long) work of textile and conservation specialists, whose research is described and recorded with ample photographs and drawings now made available to us through this important volume.

The authors walk the reader through a careful documentation of the textiles, from whole garments to small objects of felt or fur. Some of these objects are well known to us; others have never before been seen, or at least in this new light. What makes this volume strong in particular, is how well the reconstructions are reasoned and rendered, through new analyses, and re-study. The text offers functional as well as artistic perspectives.¹ Thus, groundwork has been laid out for a closer understanding of how dress was used as markers of social and cultural identity, boundary and memory, and imbued with cosmologically and spiritually symbolic content.

The book discusses textiles preserved from both the Ukok 'Ice Princess', Ak-Alakha 3 (Polosmak 1991a, 1993) and related, earlier-discovered materials from the famous Pazyryk tombs first published by Rudenko (1953, 1970). This book

is highly valuable in its technical detail, its high quality images and well-rendered drawings, and also in its interpretive discussions of the clothing. This a welcome departure from much of the earlier archaeological literature from Russia and the former Soviet Union, where thin paper and black-and-white line drawings, often without any scale, accompanied the vast majority of archaeological publications.

The book is organized into three main sections. The first is an introduction to the material (pp. 5–10) and a discussion of the historical and ethnographic parallels in this important collection of archaeologically recovered textiles.² This section is divided into three subsequent chapters. Ch. II is on Pazyryk costume (p. 21–104), Ch. III is on the felts and horsegear (pp. 105–38) and Ch. IV a detailed review of the pile carpet and large felt *suzani* and several other materials from barrow V (139–64). The next section is an ethnobotanical and materials science-based section on dyes, colorants and dyestuffs (pp. 165–75). The last section is a series of appendices on technical and scientific studies carried out on the textiles by individual collaborators of their team.³ The book has a brief summary in English (pp. 228–9)

Dress of the Pazyryk in the Altai

There are several more-or-less fully reconstructed garments; fur-lined coats and jackets from Barrow II at Pazyryk, and from nearby Verkh-Kaldzhin 2. In addition there are numerous textile fragments from related tombs. Male and female dress elements are discussed; even child's garments are documented. Among the garments discussed in this book are several sets of female clothing: skirts, shirts; outer garments, and pairs of felt and leather leggings, shoes and boots. Barkova and Polosmak offer variant possible reconstructions (p. 44, figs. 2.15–2.17).

One of the nearly complete shirts from Pazyryk barrow II, for example, was re-studied and

discussed in detail. Rudenko had described it as a man's shirt, sewn from hemp fiber or *kendyr*, of a light color (Rudenko 1953, p. 104; 1970, p. 83 and pl. 63). According to the authors' recent re-testing, the fabric was woven from *cotton* (p. 44) and had been dyed a fugitive red which had faded. Re-evaluation based in part on *comparanda* from Ak-Alakha 3 led the authors to propose it was in fact a woman's chemise.

Skirts from barrow II were made from woolen fabric (Rudenko 1953, pp. 246–247, tab. XCVIII). One was reconstructed from a fragment based on parallels observed in the skirt from barrow I at Ak-Alakha 3, and from the discoveries in Xinjiang tombs at Subashi, Chärchän, and Djamboulak Khoum (Keriya). One must meet some of these reconstructions with a note of caution, however. By relying on clothing from other more distant sites as proxy, especially when contemporaneity is uncertain, we may blur important subtle distinctions in dress between similar groups.

Some of the most intriguing finds have related to headdress and hair, especially the female headgear. An almost complete set of elements – including wooden figurines of birds and deer, red wool knitted *nakosniki* – was found in Pazyryk Barrow II. Because of the more recent and better-preserved headdress from Ukok, a more complete reconstruction was possible [Fig. 1]. The cap is made from thick, dark brown felt, its fields decorated with round leather patches covered with gold foil. It was restored from fragments to the headdress in 2003. The headdresses of Pazyryk noblewomen were worn with coiffed hair built in, and placed on a clean-shaven head.

Stunning examples of felt and deerskin leggings are described and portrayed on pp.92–97. These leggings have parallels seen in the Apadana at Persepolis, and some have slippers built in whose designed toe area matches the design of the caftan. From Pazyryk barrow II is a pair of leather

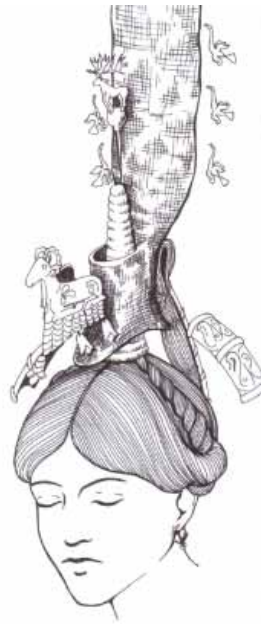


Fig. 1. Headdress reconstructed from Pazyryk barrow no. II

After Barkova and Polosmak 2005



Fig. 2. Reconstructed boot from Pazyryk barrow no. II. Collection of the State Hermitage Museum

boots, whose soles are completely embroidered with beads and pyrite crystals [Fig. 2].⁴

Outer garments

According to the authors, the outer garment is of primary significance to the Pazyryk people. While this is certainly understandable from a survival point of view, it also can be thought of in terms of public vs. private display of identity. In the fluid interactions of nomadic tribes, where affinities and alliances can change in different contexts, the way in which a person most effectively codifies affiliation and rank, particularly of noble or leadership rank, is seen through the coat. There are several types of outer garment discussed, with particular interest and attention brought to two distinct Iranian forms: the *kandys*, or tailored jacket, often with lapel and vestigial sleeves, and the caudate jacket, or tailed coat. Both of these forms are direct ancestors to modern dress in the West.

An outstanding example of a sable coat was found in Pazyryk Barrow II: with a bilaterally symmetrical leather appliqué on



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the back that had the image of a fantastic deer, a remarkable feat of skill in leathercraft. The authors note analogues found at Philippova barrow. On a technical level, remarkable skill in stitching pieces of leather together is discussed — where seams have nearly 20 stitches per centimeter (no doubt to insure windproofing). Another coat shows similar technique and workmanship with an abstract geometric design (pp. 44–45)[Fig. 3]. The skin of a black foal was used for trim décor on the sable, decorated with lozenge-shaped leather appliqué and covered with gold foil.

The authors address the topic of the caudate jacket, with historical counterparts and analogues within the Scytho-Siberian arena and beyond, looking at its development in the context of horse riding. They suggest that another outer garment form, the *kandys*, stems from Achaemenid Iranian origins, a theme shared by other scholars (see Thompson 1965). However it is equally possible that both of these forms, this garment *genre*, developed specifically out of the Altai and were custom-made for the complex landscape — both social and physical — of early Iron Age inner Eurasia and that these forms were brought to Hamadan from the steppes. Indeed it is very significant that the tailored forms take hold within the craft of leatherworking and horse riding, and according to current evidence only later become transferred over to woven cloth; first as sewn tailoring, and later as cut-cloth tailoring [Fig. 4].

The authors link important material details of the garments with associated mythological,

Fig. 3. Section of sleeve showing detail of decorative leatherwork on outer garment from Pazyryk barrow II.

Fig. 4. Detail of tailored shaping in woven jacket from Chärchän.

ethnographic, linguistic and folk knowledge. For example, in their discussion of a unique red and blue painted ermine *kandys* from Katandin's Barrow at Pazyryk, (excavated in 1865 by Radlov), the authors suggest the use of ermine had symbolic value: as in Iranian mythology, the ermine was considered a mediator between the three planes of the world-axis (Chunakova 2004, p. 87, as cited in Barkova and Polos'mak, pp. 58–61).



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A formal analysis of style

Formal analysis, as a practice, is a systematic dismantling of visual components in order to objectify what is being studied. By looking at composition, motif, and form on an elemental level, comparative study can be facilitated. Such an idiom thus brings us closer to an archaeological understanding of the language of a particular style. Style functions as a vehicle of social mediation — a series of varied interpretations. The effects of stylistic interpretation are social. Style plays on dominant areas of concern within a cultural context; thus an object has style, which is simultaneously socially animated and *animating*. Archaeologically, an object (such as cloth) embodies style, which was generated through its particular social context, which is now inanimate and less visible. Although the object is at present socially animating, it is as an artifact having temporal disconnection. Of interest to us is to recognize traces of information on the animating aspect that the object once had, within the social context of its origin. Wobst (1977) explored the idea of style as being a way of maintaining social boundaries. Pollock (1983) developed a set of theoretical constructs to look at diachronic changes in style in relation to sociopolitical organization. In the present study, style is looked at synchronically, within a relatively narrow culture area, and within a narrow medium — textiles and dress. Such a focus may facilitate closer examination of content and stylistic variation.

Animal Style

Animal Style can perhaps be described as a play between abstract and representational visual elements. Overall graphic composition is sometimes formalized (i.e. inside borders, tiered repetitive patterns and the use of bilateral symmetry), and sometimes it is not (for example in tattooing). Abstract (geometric) forms are represented, and representational forms are abstracted. There is a prominent use of contrasts; in solid colors, in space/void, in combatant animals, and in composite animals. Although Animal Style is best known from goldwork,⁵ it is found in other media as well, including carved wood, cut leather, and appliqué felt. In fact, it is possible that the hallmark elements of what we recognize as Animal Style, particularly the use of void and solid, and the prominence of flat work and low relief, were derivative of the crafts of cut leather and appliqué felting.

Barkova and Polos'mak discuss a small selection of well-known, roughly contemporaneous (ca. 500–400 BCE), decorated felts from Pazyryk barrows I, II and V. These felts have been given less attention than perhaps deserved in the past, eclipsed by the famous pile carpet. Along with the Pazyryk felts, the authors include the more recently excavated felt materials from Ak-Alakhsa, about 250 km SW of Pazyryk in the Ukok Valley (excavated by Polos'mak) and also of a contemporaneous kurgan at the Chinese/Kazakh/Mongolian border, in the vicinity of the related Berel Mounds, the site of the now famous 'Siberian Ice-maiden', excavated by Polos'mak. Each of these burials contained decorated felts.

Some felts were used as floor coverings, some were meant as wall hangings, some were part of chariot outfitting or saddlery, and some were decorative elements of dress or accessory.

Placement of textiles in the actual barrows at Pazyryk, particularly barrows I, II and V, is immediately informative. Floor felts and wall hangings covered the inner timber-lined burial chambers, reinforcing the defined interior walled space, as analogous to domestic interior space. This idea is also borne out by the placement of grave goods: tables and 'hexapods' with vessels containing meals, helped to define an interior space, separate from the room with horse burials and chariots (exterior). Floor felts were of dark wool and undecorated. Wall hangings were of light coloured wool and were decorated. Wall felts contained repetitive designs, but of representational images, within a border, for example from barrow V, the seated deity holding a 'branch' facing the horseman (Rudenko 1970, pl. 154). From the same wall hanging is the composite human/lion sphinx figure; and a fragment of a bird with elaborate tail. By contrast, saddle blankets, or *shabraks* tended to have repeated abstract designs (Ibid., pls. 160–162) [Fig. 5]. One particular shabrak had a very similar element to that found in the border of the large wall hanging mentioned earlier. Abstract repeats are evident in the detailed view of shabraks from the Pazyryk carpet as well. Border designs from felts in barrow II are distinct from one from barrow I; and a familiar treatment of the lion head is found in a saddle cover also from barrow I. The basic differences in overall composition between wall felts and saddle blankets are significant in that they are objects with different exposure: the interior wall imagery was private and hidden, whereas the dressage for horses and chariots were publicly displayed and were also highly mobile.

At the site of the 'ice-maiden' near the Chinese-Kazakh border, a decorated felt saddle was found showing a mythical winged animal, one of many composite animals found in Pazyryk culture. Jacobson (1994) has worked on the cosmological meaning of composite animals as sacred motif in her study of the deer in Eurasian art. Griffin-like creatures are a common subject in felts, and also in gold foil-covered leather and also wooden

fittings for horse harnesses. In the Ukok Valley, Ak-Alakhsa kurgan contained many such griffin-like elements in harness decoration. It is tempting to speculate on the meaning of the griffin motif, especially in light of later mythology, describing griffins as guardians of treasure, of gold in particular. Perhaps the representation of the griffin on objects in the Pazyryk world offered some kind of apotropaic power. These small objects are somewhat unique in that they are constructed of two intersecting planes, and are thus three-dimensional, a quality almost foreign to what we think of as typically *animal style*.

Old Avestan (old Iranian) texts (*Gathas*) on the creation myth may also offer some insight into the relationship between these entombed decorated felts and sacred space. Current scholarship regarding the imagery in certain ritual texts⁶ of the creation myth point to the idea of a 'cosmic hut,' where the sky is tied down during the day and rolled up at night. Several texts relate to the story of creation through architectural metaphor, which is also attested in Greek and Old Indic myths (Kellens 1989; Christol 1987; Skjaervø n. d.). Skjaervø argues for the possibility of there



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Fig. 5. Felt shabrak from Pazyryk barrow no. V. Collection of the State Hermitage Museum.

being another, overarching metaphor of weaving for the creation of order.

It is possible the imagery has to do with not a 'cosmic hut,' but of a yurt,⁷ which is made of woven bands, and covered with felts, and also decorated on the interior with felts. In metaphoric imagery in the *Rgveda*, Christol (1987, p. 12) found the following processes: 1. raising an armature of wood; 2. stretching a cover over it; 3. making an opening; 4. spreading a floor carpet inside and attaching it to the walls. This list of processes describes precisely the method of building a yurt, which is taken down and put up again, as a reiteration of night passing into day. Furthermore, the dual house forms of summer (yurt) and winter (timber hut), as witnessed in contemporary Kazakh dwellings, are integrated into one in the timber-lined chambered burial tombs of the Pazyryk culture. The significance of the yurt imagery in the Avestan creation texts may well be seen as *à propos* for the rite of burial in Pazyryk culture as well, as a marking out of ordered space in preparation for the afterlife.

It is hypothesized here that in one way, the decorated felts functioned as markers of social space, as a way of distinguishing interior from exterior, public and private domestic areas, as well as distinguishing sacred vs. secular space. These objects also played an important role as vehicles of the iconographic communication of cultural boundaries in the multi-ethnic, multicultural, wide open spaces of the Eurasian steppes in the later first millennium BCE. Although today these boundaries are blurred because we recognize Animal Style as a more or less coherent category, in the mid-first millennium BCE the creators and users of these felt objects must have differentiated various semantic visual components within what was to them an iconographic language. Representational images illustrated a Pazyryk understanding of the supernatural world, through a socially animated style. We can begin to read the animating aspect of this style by looking at how these felts were used to convey this world to the world at large.

Summary

One of the most valuable aspects of this volume is in the discussion of garment form. The comparative survey of different forms of outer

garment in the Altai, Siberia, Mongolia, and the Syr Darya regions is fascinating and informative, particularly because they interject *comparanda* with folk symbolism and myth.

In this volume, however, there is often a blur between what is scientific observation and what is (nuanced) interpretation. This is problematic, as many readers will be interested, but not expert in, the culture history of the Altai, or of neighbouring regions such as the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, Semirechye or the Mongolian Steppes. The main audience, therefore, would be unable to cast a critical eye on certain details.

That said, however, this is a beautiful and generously colour-illustrated volume (119 figures and plates). It is most decidedly not a 'coffee-table,' magazine-depth level of documentation. It is a scholarly reference of the first order. This book is an invaluable reference even for those without knowledge of Russian, as the graphics are informative, ample and detailed. Textile historians in general, and of Eurasia in particular, will fully appreciate the technical discussions and clear disclosure of the clothing and its materials from these remarkable archaeological finds, rescued and restored from a remarkable part of the world.

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Notes

1. Hodder (1990) strictly rejects dichotomizing the 'utilitarian function' of an object from its style, noting that objects have social and ideological as well as utilitarian functions, and that style involves, but does not solely consist of, those functions. I maintain that, heuristically, it is imperative for archaeologists to be able to distinguish, on a very fundamental level, *functional* (utilitarian) constraints from artistic style as variable aspects of an object's form. Only in so doing can we move away from using style as a strictly typological tool, and move towards its counterpoint, that of using style as interpretation, i. e., *reading an object*.

2. Notable in particular as many rare ancient textiles come to us through illicit and undocumented excavation.

3. L. S. Dovlumova, E. A. Koroliuk, I. L. Krevskaia, L. P. Kundo, B. B. Malakhov, B. N. Mamashev, B. T. Vasiliev, A. A. Vlasov, and T. T. Vialakina.

4. Rudenko, 1953, pp. 118–20; tab. XCVI, 1; XCII, 1; XXIV, 2; 1970, pp. 93, 95 and pl. 64a; reconstruction completed by D. V. Pozdniakov.

5. Most notably from the collections of Peter the Great in the Hermitage Museum.

6. Most notably the 13th *vasht* in the myth of the Fravashis. This is mainly the work of P. Oktor Skjaervø, with ideas of Jean Kellens (1989) and Alain Christol (1987).

7. "Yurt" is a Turkic word meaning "place." The felt tent is an *alaçekh*.