

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE SAKA–MASSAGETAE PERIOD: THE CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The religious beliefs of the Saka–Massagetae tribes represent an important stage in the spiritual and cultural development of ancient Central Asian nomadic societies. This article examines the formation, structure, and socio-cultural significance of religious beliefs among the Saka–Massagetae, based on archaeological, historical, and comparative sources. Particular attention is given to the worship of natural forces, solar cults, ancestor veneration, and animal symbolism, which played a central role in shaping their worldview. Archaeological evidence, including burial mounds (kurgans), grave goods, ritual objects, and symbolic decorations, indicates that the Saka–Massagetae possessed complex spiritual concepts related to the afterlife, divine protection, and cosmic order. Their religious system was closely connected with nomadic life, military traditions, and ecological dependence. Natural elements such as the sun, fire, sky, and sacred animals were regarded as powerful spiritual forces influencing human destiny. The study concludes that the religious beliefs of the Saka–Massagetae were not primitive or random but represented an organized system of mythological and ritual practices that contributed to social cohesion, political legitimacy, and cultural identity.

Keywords: Saka–Massagetae; Central Asia; early religious beliefs; nomadic culture; solar cult; ancestor worship; burial mounds; kurgans; animal symbolism; ancient religion.

Introduction

The study of early religious beliefs provides valuable insight into the worldview, social organization, and cultural development of ancient civilizations. Among the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, the Saka–Massagetae tribes occupied a significant place in the historical and cultural landscape during the first millennium BCE. These tribes, known from archaeological evidence and classical historical sources, developed distinctive spiritual systems closely connected with their nomadic lifestyle and natural environment. The Saka–Massagetae inhabited vast territories across Central Asia, including present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and neighboring regions. Their economy was based on pastoral nomadism, warfare, and seasonal migration, which influenced their perception of nature and the cosmos. As a result, their religious beliefs were primarily centered on natural forces such as the sun, sky, fire, and earth. These elements were considered sacred and were believed to possess divine power. Archaeological discoveries, particularly burial mounds known as kurgans, provide important evidence of the religious worldview of the Saka–Massagetae. The presence of weapons, ornaments, animal remains, and ritual objects in graves indicates belief in the afterlife and the continuation of spiritual existence. Animal symbolism, especially involving horses, deer, and predatory animals, reflects totemic concepts and mythological representations associated with protection, strength, and divine authority. In addition, ancestor worship played a central role in maintaining social continuity and tribal identity. Ritual practices and funerary traditions demonstrate the importance of honoring the dead and preserving spiritual connections between generations.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining archaeological, historical, and comparative-religious analysis to investigate the religious beliefs of the Saka–Massagetae tribes in Central Asia. The primary materials used in this research include archaeological findings from burial mounds (kurgans), funerary structures, ritual objects, weapons, ornaments, and animal remains discovered across Central Asia, particularly in regions corresponding to ancient Saka–Massagetae settlements. These materials provide direct evidence of spiritual practices, funerary traditions, and symbolic representations. In addition, the study draws upon classical written sources, including accounts from ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus, as well as modern archaeological and anthropological research conducted in Central Asia. The following research methods were applied: Archaeological analysis – to examine burial structures, grave goods, and ritual artifacts in order to identify religious symbolism and funerary practices. Comparative-historical method – to compare the religious beliefs of the Saka–

Massagetae with those of other ancient nomadic and early Indo-Iranian cultures. Structural-functional analysis – to evaluate the role of religious beliefs in maintaining social order, political legitimacy, and cultural continuity. Symbolic interpretation method – to analyze animal motifs, solar symbols, and ritual objects as expressions of mythological and religious concepts.

Results

The results of the study indicate that the religious beliefs of the Saka–Massagetae tribes formed a complex and organized system closely connected with their nomadic lifestyle and natural environment. Archaeological evidence from burial mounds demonstrates a strong belief in the afterlife. The inclusion of weapons, jewelry, tools, and personal belongings in graves suggests that the Saka–Massagetae believed in the continuation of life after death. These grave goods were likely intended to serve the deceased in the spiritual world. The presence of horse remains in some burials indicates the sacred role of horses, symbolizing status, mobility, and spiritual power. Solar worship was one of the central elements of their religious system. Symbols associated with the sun, such as circular ornaments and radiant patterns, were commonly found in burial artifacts and decorative objects.

Discussion

The religious beliefs of the Saka–Massagetae reflect a sophisticated spiritual system shaped by environmental conditions, nomadic traditions, and social organization. Their dependence on natural forces for survival contributed to the development of nature worship, particularly the veneration of the sun, sky, fire, and animals. The central role of burial rituals demonstrates that belief in the afterlife was a fundamental component of their worldview. This belief provided psychological stability and reinforced moral and social norms. The presence of valuable objects in graves suggests not only spiritual beliefs but also social stratification and the importance of status in Saka–Massagetae society. Animal symbolism found in archaeological artifacts indicates the existence of totemic and mythological concepts. These symbols likely served both religious and social functions, reinforcing group identity and expressing spiritual protection. The sacred status of horses, in particular, highlights their importance in both daily life and religious imagination. Solar worship reflects the broader Indo-Iranian religious tradition, suggesting cultural and spiritual continuity across ancient Central Asia. The sun was perceived as a universal life-giving force, and its worship represented an early form of cosmic religious thinking.

Conclusion

The study of religious beliefs during the Saka–Massagetae period reveals that these ancient nomadic tribes possessed a complex and structured spiritual system deeply connected with their natural environment, social organization, and cultural traditions. Archaeological evidence, including burial mounds, grave goods, animal remains, and symbolic ornaments, confirms the existence of well-developed religious concepts related to the afterlife, nature worship, solar cults, and ancestor veneration. The belief in the afterlife played a central role in the spiritual worldview of the Saka–Massagetae, as reflected in their elaborate burial practices. The inclusion of weapons, personal belongings, and ritual objects in graves indicates that death was perceived not as the end of existence but as a transition to another spiritual realm. This belief strengthened social continuity and preserved cultural identity across generations. The worship of natural forces, particularly the sun, fire, and sacred animals, reflects the ecological and nomadic foundations of their society. Animal symbolism and totemic representations served both religious and social functions, reinforcing tribal unity and spiritual protection.

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