

Description

The "Golden Man" of the Issyk kurgan burial mound, dating to the 4th or 5th century B.C.E. in what is now Kazakhstan, is one of the most spectacular archaeological finds of the 20th century. This individual was buried in a suit composed of over 4,000 gold pieces, including a 70-centimeter (27.5") conical headdress adorned with gold plaques depicting snow leopards and winged horses. The tomb also contained a silver bowl bearing an unidentified inscription. The warrior's sex remains a subject of genuine scientific debate — poor bone preservation has prevented definitive DNA gender testing, and four other "golden women" have been found in similarly elite burials nearby, raising the reasonable possibility that the warrior was female.

This individual belonged to the Saka, a confederation of nomads who spoke an Eastern Iranian language and dominated the Kazakh steppe during the Iron Age. The Saka were renowned for their mastery of the horse, their sophisticated metallurgical skills, and their capacity to project power across vast distances. The golden burial suit is now a symbol of national identity for modern Kazakhstan, reproduced on currency and monuments.

Broad genomic studies of related Saka burials reveal a population characterized by a mix of West and East Eurasian ancestry, reflecting centuries of movement, trade, and intermarriage across the steppe. Their social structure was patrilineal, with stable paternal lineages — commonly haplogroups Q and R — and high female mobility through inter-tribal marriage networks. The silver bowl with its unidentified inscription suggests the Saka possessed a complex political structure and possibly their own writing system. The Golden Warrior is the most vivid individual representative of a nomadic civilization that commanded the heart of Eurasia during the Iron Age, and whose genomic profile reflects the broad diversity of steppe populations that defined this era.

Modern population	Distance
Bashkir (Baymasky)	4.777
Bashkir (Ishimbaysky)	4.820
Bashkir (Kugarchinsky)	5.047
Siberian Tatar	5.815
Siberian Tatar (Tom)	6.574

Modern population	Distance
Bashkir (Arkhangelsky)	6.695
Bashkir (Davlekanovsky)	7.778
Bashkir (Karaidelsky)	8.350
Nogai (Stavropol)	8.655
Uzbek	8.832

Source

Date: 789–546 BCE

Y-DNA: R-YP1548

mtDNA: J1b1a1e

Location: Kazakhstan

Research: Ancient genomic time transect from the Central Asian Steppe unravels the history of the Scythians

Sample(s): ESZ001.AG