

A Golden History

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Kazakhstan's new banknote series tells the story of the little-known but extraordinary Saka



Kazakhstan's new 5,000 tenge banknote draws inspiration from the ancient Saka culture.

JUST 50 KM EAST OF ALMATY, Kazakhstan's largest city, lies a Saka burial mound dating back to the Iron Age. Unearthed in 1969, the site held the country's most significant archaeological find—the Golden Man. Clad in a suit of gold with a tall, pointed headdress resembling a crown, the ancient warrior was buried with over 4,000 gold artifacts, a short sword and dagger, and a silver bowl inscribed with the oldest known example of runic writing in Asia. The artistry and craftsmanship of the artifacts—mostly animal motifs—are highly sophisticated, shedding light on a little-known civilization light-years ahead of its time.

After Kazakhstan's independence, the Golden Man became a national icon. The warrior's armor takes pride of place in the national museum in Astana and tours the world, representing the country's rich cultural heritage and deep roots in central Asia, and is depicted on various state symbols and emblems. Elements of this ancient culture are also featured in the design of the country's new banknote series issued in December 2023, which is "dedicated to the Saka culture, emphasizing their connection with nature," according to the National Bank of Kazakhstan.

The Saka were an ancient tribe of nomadic warriors, later known as the Scythians. From about 900 to 200 BC they dom-

inated the Eurasian steppe—a historically important travel and trade route that preceded the Silk Road. But they were largely unknown until the 18th century, when widespread looting of the burial mounds led to the discovery of hundreds of artifacts.

Dozens of archaeological sites have been uncovered since, but the Issyk kurgan, excavated in the 1960s, was the first of only two burial mounds found completely intact.

The front of the recently released 5,000 tenge banknote features a tree of life branch with a hovering bird from the Golden Man's headdress, symbolizing the connection to nature. A golden eagle-shaped artifact—recovered from the Taldy 2 burial ground in the Karaganda region—represents freedom and strength, according to the bank, and the country's strong ancestral ties to raptors, widely used for hunting.

On the back is a DNA spiral, which symbolizes the "infinite passage of time." As the late Shirin Akiner, a renowned scholar of Central Asian studies, noted in a documentary, there is still much to discover: "It does throw light on a period that really is dark—not because nothing is happening but because we simply don't know enough about it." **F&D**

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A display in the National Museum of Kazakhstan, Astana, showing a reproduction of clothing and equipment of the "Golden Man," an ancient Saka warrior.