

CHAPTER VII

OBJECTS DERIVED FROM THE SARMATIANS

Once again it is Rostovtzeff who furnishes us with the most accurate information concerning the successors of the Scythians in the vicinity of the Black Sea, the Sarmatians (1). We know of them in the Kuban as far back as the IV and III centuries B.C., but we do not find much of their work before 200. They ruled over the western Steppes for more than four hundred years, until they were overthrown by Celtic and Germanic invaders. The date of many Sarmatian monuments is uncertain, as is also the provenance of the most important examples. Of the gold objects which thanks to Peter the Great are now in the Hermitage, we only know that they came from Siberia. However Sarmatian influence was felt far into Asia, and its effect on Chinese northern frontier art may be explained in a very natural way.

1) Plaques as belt fasteners.

Among other inventions, the Sarmatians discovered a new way of fastening the belt, consisting of two metal plaques cast in pairs to be placed at either end of a leather strap (2). This object, when reproduced at the Chinese frontier, thus forms part of the inheritance from the second ethnical group that produced art in the western Steppes. As for the ornamentation, it is derived as much from other influences as from the Sarmatians. Before dealing with the motives in detail, we must first make certain general remarks that are applicable to all belt-plaques.

The two metal plaques meet at the middle of the belt, so that the hook of one enters the loop or opening (often in the form of a half circle) of the other. The principal shapes are those of a rectangle or of a B lying on its back with the outer circle higher than the inner. Specimens found in the western Steppes are the oldest examples of the type. Among the better known pieces are the silver plaques from Maikop (3) (Hermitage), and the silver-gilt plaque from Bulgaria, now in the British Museum (4). There are gold objects that come from farther east, among them those that belonged to Peter the Great. The constant appearance of this object is verified by documents all over Asia, but its use is often uncertain, above all in our region, the eastern Steppes. The hook that