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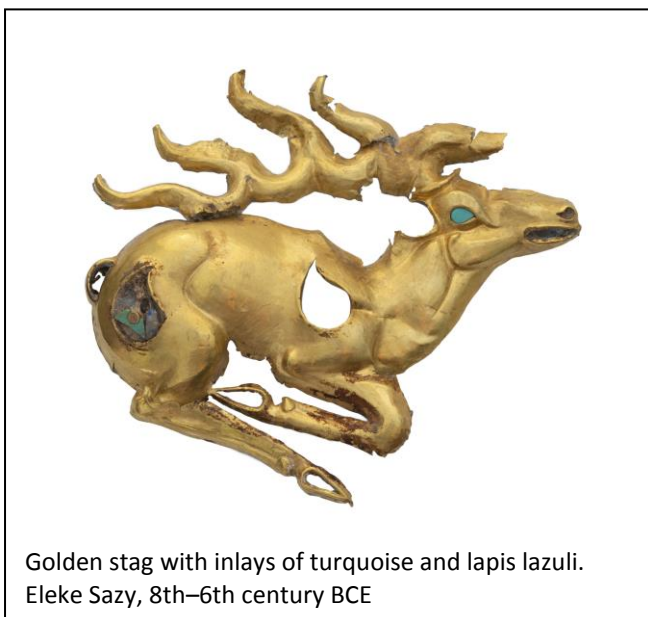
First UK exhibition of 2,700 year-old Gold artefacts from the ancient Saka burial mounds of East Kazakhstan to go on show this autumn



Gold scabbard for a dagger with turquoise and lapis lazuli inlay, Eleke Sazy 8th – 6th century BCE

Gold of The Great Steppe (28 September 2021 – 30 January 2022) will display an archaeological sensation, hundreds of outstanding gold artefacts recently discovered in the extraordinary ancient burial mounds built by the Saka people in East Kazakhstan.

The Saka culture of Central Asia flourished from at least the 8th-3rd centuries BCE, with earlier roots in East Kazakhstan. It was one of the earliest expressions of the Scythian culture that came to dominate the Eurasian steppe from the Black Sea to Siberia. Located in the Altai mountain system, the Saka of East Kazakhstan were a vibrant society who occupied a landscape of wide open skies, rolling plains and soaring mountains.



Golden stag with inlays of turquoise and lapis lazuli.
Eleke Sazy, 8th–6th century BCE

This exhibition will place archaeological finds discovered in the last three years by Kazakh archaeologists on a global stage for the first time, amplifying voices that often go unheard in museums in the west and giving UK audiences a unique opportunity to see and understand for the first time the rich cultural history of a country the size of western Europe.

Numerous spectacular artefacts were unearthed during the pandemic, and represent the resilience and determination of Kazakhstani archaeologists to protect and document their heritage, which is under threat from looting and degradation due to climate change.

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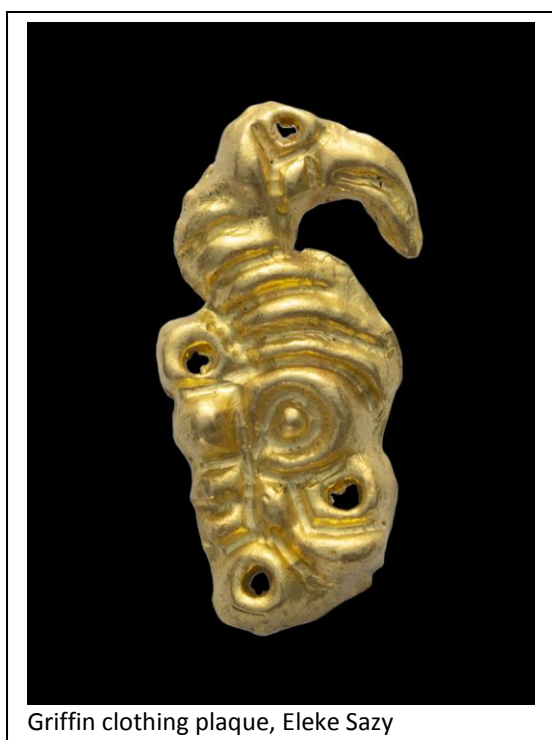
The Saka people dominated their landscapes with huge architectural burial mounds of ambitious technological construction, burying elite members of their society with their horses and precious gold objects. Most of burial mounds were plundered and robbed in ancient times. On show in the exhibition will be the spectacular contents from an extremely rare undisturbed intact Saka burial, only the second to be discovered on the territory of Kazakhstan. In a richly furnished grave, a teenage archer, no older than 18 when he died, was buried in the same chamber with a younger female close relative, aged 13-14. While the girl's remains were heavily looted in antiquity, the grave of the male youth appears to have been protected from being plundered by a rock fall which shielded him from view and knowledge of his existence for over 2,500 years.

A reconstruction of his burial will display the golden symbols of power and how they were laid alongside him, demonstrating their exceptional preservation. This fascinating and tender discovery belies a society where status appears to have been acquired through family ties, where noble youths were afforded rich family burials, and teenagers were buried as warriors.

The unearthed artefacts have revealed the Saka as a distinctive, complex society, with immense skill, who used an advanced understanding of design, intricate engineering, and technology to produce wonderful artefacts such as thousands of decorative gold micro-beads, just 1 millimetre in diameter, to be sewn onto clothing and sophisticated weapon-belt attachments that were hinged to absorb the movement of weaponry while in motion on horseback.



Gold pear shaped plaque found on bow-case with inlays of semi-precious stones, Eleke Sazy 8th – 6th century BCE



Griffin clothing plaque, Eleke Sazy

The artefacts found buried with human and horse remains - astounding pieces of gold jewellery, horse harness ornaments, gold appliqué to adorn clothes and costume in the form of decorative gold discs and plaques, animal forms inlaid with precious stones - all dismantle the preconception of the Saka people as being the barbaric 'other' described by ancient Persian and Greek sources.

While clearly upholding their reputation as skilled and noble warriors, the artefacts show the use of highly skilled metalworking techniques, indicating an exceptional level of artisanship that existed in the 1st millennium BCE, as well as a deep respect and understanding for the animals of the great steppe – both real and imagined.

The relationship between horses and humans has its earliest origins on the territory of Kazakhstan. The Saka were expert equestrians, often taking their beloved horses with them to the grave and the afterlife beyond. Favourite horses were specially adorned in burials, dressed in haunting elaborate masks, saddle pendants, decorated harnesses, and covers for the mane and tail decorated in gold pieces which transformed them into mythical beasts, or revealed their true spirit.

This exhibition will bring to the UK Kazakhstani archaeological finds and research from three different burial complexes in East Kazakhstan: Berel, Shilikti and Eleke Sazy. It will allow visitors to discover the life and legacy of the Saka people, revealing their history like never before, and exploring points of resonance with Kazakh culture today.

2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the independent Republic of Kazakhstan, and this partnership between the East Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History and the University of Cambridge represents the growing application of archaeological science that is being driven by Kazakhstani researchers. The Fitzwilliam Museum will be working in partnership with research scientists at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, to uncover new secrets held by these artefacts using the latest non-invasive technology. New results from the collaboration will be included in the exhibition and digitally as an ongoing research exhibition legacy.

Dr Paola Ricciardi Senior Research Scientist at the Fitzwilliam Museum, said *'The recent £3 million funding to the University of Cambridge's CHERISH consortium from the Arts and Humanities Research Council has enabled investment in state of the art scientific laboratories and equipment, which researchers will use to undertake analyses on a scale not possible before'*.

Luke Syson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, said *'It is hugely exciting to be announcing the loan of these incredibly important, recently discovered gold artefacts this autumn. We look forward to bringing the extraordinary culture of the Saka people to life for our audiences and are grateful to our partnership with East Kazakhstan without which enlightening exhibitions such as these would simply not be possible.'*

H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United Kingdom, said *"In the coming few months, we will celebrate a number of important milestones, including the 30th Anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence and the 30th Anniversary of the establishment of a diplomatic relationship between Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom. I find it very timely and appropriate that the Gold of the Great Steppe exhibition is coming to one of the best UK museums at such an auspicious time."*

"I am delighted that the British public will have an opportunity to immerse themselves into unique culture and history of our politically young and historically ancient nation. The time-tested strategic partnership that so happily exists between Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom is based on the solid foundation of friendly people-to-people ties and an intensive cultural exchange. I cannot stress enough how important it is to continue supporting mutual understanding and interest in history and culture of our two nations."

"I applaud the University of Cambridge and the Fitzwilliam Museum for their prodigious effort to bring Kazakhstan and the Kazakh culture in the focus of the attention of British and global audiences. I am immensely grateful to all organisations and individuals who contributed to the exhibition and helped strengthen further the bonds of friendship between Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom."

Danial Akhmetov, Governor of the East Kazakhstan Region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, said *“This exhibition will present Kazakhstan’s most outstanding archaeological discovery of recent years, the ‘golden man’ found in one of the mounds of the Eleke Sazy cemetery, which dates back to the 8th century BC. This man was named ‘golden’ not because of the more than 15,000 individual gold items that were found there – such finds come from other elite, but heavily looted and destroyed mounds – but because his was only the second undisturbed Saka burial in Kazakhstan, the first being the Issyk mound in Zhetysu. This exceptional state of preservation allowed specialists to answer a number of anthropological and genetic questions, but, most importantly, to make the most reliable reconstruction of the ceremonial funeral costume and weapons of the royal youth in the shortest possible time. Finding in situ costume embellishments and weapons in this mound opened up new opportunities for scientists to study the religion, worldview and funeral rites of the early Saka people.”*

“Five years ago, we launched a large-scale and unique archaeological research programme in the East Kazakhstan Region of the Republic of Kazakhstan. During this time, dozens of new archaeological sites have been discovered and studied. They have enriched our knowledge about the chronological framework of prehistoric and medieval cultures. It has been proven that the Saka created truly unique jewellery masterpieces, using technological processes that were advanced for their time, constructed grandiose and exceptionally complex religious, funerary and memorial monuments.”

“We thank the management of the University of Cambridge and the Fitzwilliam Museum staff for their joint efforts to host the Gold of the Great Steppe exhibition. We are confident that the exhibition, and the research carried out around it, will open to the public new pages in the history of both the East Kazakhstan Region, and all humankind.”

**For all other enquires please contact the Fitzwilliam Museum Press Office:
07788 727 601 | press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk | ehs33@cam.ac.uk**

Notes to Editors

Gold of the Great Steppe runs from 28 September 2021 to 30th January 2022 in the Mellon and Adeane Galleries at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Exhibition tickets are FREE sign up to our E-news to be among the first to be notified of ticket releases.

The exhibition is supported by and organised with the Regional Museum of History and Local Studies of the Department of Culture, Archives and Documentation of East Kazakhstan.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) supports world-class research into human culture and creativity. The AHRC is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The illustrated exhibition catalogue, Gold of the Great Steppe, edited by Rebecca Roberts, will be published by Paul Holberton Publishing. Hardback, 184 pages, £27.50, ISBN 978-1-911300-91-5

Follow updates via #SakaGold on our Twitter@FitzMuseum_UK, Instagram @fitzmuseum_uk and Facebook @fitzwilliammuseum

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation <https://beta.fitz.ms>

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday .