

Snow Leopards in Ancient Artwork in Central Asia

One of the interesting aspects of ISLT advisor Kathleen Braden's recent visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was an opportunity to learn about the snow leopard as a symbol to the ancient people of the region. The Scythian and Sakian culture that developed among the nomads of the Eurasian steppe starting about 800 BC. is in fact referred to as the "wild animal style." One of the earliest artifacts found is of a "coiled panther," a snow leopard-like large cat with a particularly large tail. This bronze plaque dates back 1800 years and was found in South Siberia.

Perhaps the most amazing artifact is the "Golden Man," a suit of gold found in a burial mound not far from Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan. Archeologists estimate that the suit and headdress were created in the 4th or 5th century BC. and include a beautiful, carved pair of snow leopards on the headdress.

These images of snow leopards, as well as a rich array of other representations of animals, such as horses and mountain sheep, indicate that such fauna played an important role as spirit images in the shamanist religious culture of these ancient nomads. As the Kazakh and Krygyz people of today

consider policies to preserve the wildlife of Central Asia, they are remembering that animals such as the snow leopard provide an important link to their cultural heritage.

You can see photographs of these objects in the book, *Nomads of Asia*, edited by Vladimir Basilov, University of Washington Press, 1989. The book is based on an exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles of artifacts on loan from various museums of the former USSR.

