ANCIENT RHYTONS
By Barbara M. Soper

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Rhytons were ancient vessels for storing and drinking wine. The word rhyton comes from the Greek rhyta, meaning “to run through.” Rhytons featured a filler hole at the top and a hole at the bottom so that wine could flow through them like a funnel. Rhytons were used by the Minoans and Mycenaens in the Bronze Age and possibly were exported to other civilizations through sea commerce. Rhytons, in the form of animal heads or horns terminating in animal foreparts, are believed to have originated in Persia. Their spread to other peoples was by the ancient Silk Roads of Central Asia and by Persian military campaigns.

The Minoan civilization on Crete used rhytons as libation vessels, filling them with wine or possibly the blood of a sacrificed bull. A fresco from Knossos palace on Crete featured a rhyton bearer walking in a procession. The scene is reproduced on a Greek stamp (Scott 711.)

An actual tapered vessel such as the man in the fresco carried was unearthed in an archaeological dig. It became the subject of another stamp issue, Cyprus, Scott 547. The rhyton is from the 13th century B.C., is decorated with Minoan motifs, including that of a bull, and has a small hole in the base.

A Persian rhyton, now in the National Museum at Tehran, is shown on Iran (Scott 1562.) The vessel is made of gold and features a winged lion. Persian kings and commanders often
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took rhytons on their military campaigns, such as those against the Greeks. The Greek historian Herodatus described the aftermath of the Battle of Platea between Greeks and Persians in 479 B.C. After the Athenians defeated the Persians, they raided a Persian camp. There they found much silver and gold, especially golden rhytons. These vessels, taken back to Athens, became inspiration for Athenian rhytons.

Another ancient drinking horn is shown on Armenia Scott 497. It dates to the 5th century B.C. Made of silver, its lower portion depicts a horse-mounted warrior. Since prehistoric times, the Central Asian Steppe produced wave after wave of horse warriors. The treasures of these mounted horsemen had to be small and portable so that they could be carried to wherever warring factions were fighting. Rhytons were prized possessions of such warriors.

Another rhyton from Central Asia is shown on Russia (Scott 3634.) The horn-shaped vessel ends in the forepart of a wildcat or lynx. A spout for pouring is in the chest of the animal. Grapevine leaves, laden with grapes, encircle the top of the vessel and are repeated in a garland of leaves twining around the body of the wildcat. The grapevine was a symbol of the Greek wine god Dionysus, whose cult spread eastwards with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

The vessel is believed to be of Parthian manufacture and dates to the 1st century B.C. The Parthians conquered Iran in 200 B.C. and, thereafter, controlled much commerce flowing over the Silk Roads.
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Still another example of a rhyton appears on Israel (Scott 328.) The gold, ram’s headed drinking horn is from Persia and dates to the 5th century B.C. The animals depicted on these drinking vessels may have been sacred to the cultures that produced them. The passage of wine through a bull’s head or ram’s head “funnel” may have been a sacred rite—a consecration of the liquid within.

The Panagyurishte Treasure, a spectacular horde of Thracian vessels, was unearthed in central Bulgaria in 1949. The treasure consisted of seven rhytons, a rhyton-amphora, and a phial. All were drinking vessels and all were made of solid gold. The entire treasure is depicted on Bulgaria (Scott 1535-1543.) The rhytons are in the shape of deer’s heads, Amazon’s heads, and a horn with the forepart of a ram. The rhyton-amphora is the most elaborately embossed of all the vessels. Although shaped like an amphora, it functioned as a rhyton. Two spout holes beneath
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the centaurs on the handles allowed two people to drink from it.

Bulgaria’s Panagyurishte Treasure
#1539 Head Jug
#1543 Ram Drinking Horn

In 1981, Mexico issued three stamps to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state. One of these stamps

Mexico #1246
Thracian Gold Cup
(9/19/81)

Bulgaria’s Panagyurishte Treasure
#1539 Head Jug

Bulgaria’s Panagyurishte Treasure
#1542 Amphora

Rhytons are certainly fascinating objects. They tell us much about the cross pollination of cultures and art styles that took place among ancient peoples. They also tell us that both civilized folks and “barbarians” in antiquity had something in common -- a love of wine and drinking it from elegant vessels.

(Scott 1246) reproduced one of the deer’s head rhytons from the Panagyurishte Treasure. All of the vessels in the treasure show strong Greek influence but gold mining and metalworking had a long tradition in ancient Bulgaria.