

Sheath for three knives, 100 BCE–100 CE.  
Afghanistan; Tillya Tepe, Tomb 4. Bronze,  
gold, turquoise (within the sheath is the  
iron blade of a dagger with a worked ivory  
handle). *National Museum of Afghanistan.*

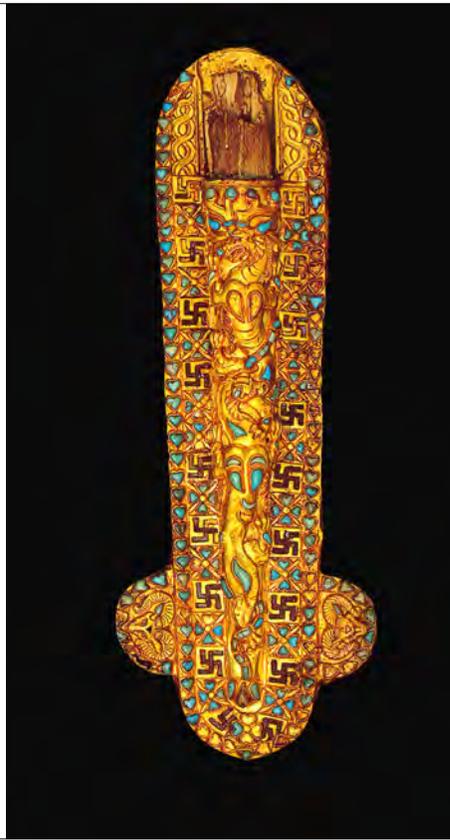


Illustration of prince wearing sheaths from  
Tillya Tepe, Tomb 4.



### **What is this object?**

This lavishly embellished object is a sheath that can hold three different blades. The rounded central section (illustrated here) contains an iron dagger with an ivory handle. On the backside of the sheath was another tube where two smaller daggers could be inserted. This construction reflects a Central Asian design, also seen in Siberia and Mongolia.

### **What was the function of this object?**

This knife sheath was part of the burial adornment for the male figure buried in Tomb 4. He was also buried with a long sword on his left side, a dagger on his right, as well as bows, quivers, and arrows. The various weapons and weaponry accoutrements interred with this figure suggest he was an important and strong military leader. Along with weapons and large jewelry items, this princely figure was also adorned with thousands of appliqué's sewn onto his clothing. Other emblems of his power and authority from the tomb site include a folding stool that might have served as a throne, and a horse sacrifice, associated with Central Asian burials.

### **What styles and motifs are represented on this object? Why is this important?**

This object is remarkable for the variety and sources of stylistic motifs and details. The central raised portion of the sheath shows two fantastical animals engaged in combat, the lower a devouring dragon, and the upper also a dragon-like creature with antlers. The latter may refer to the deer, a common nomadic theme, while the dragon is a Chinese reference. These dragon-like creatures are embellished with pieces of turquoise inlay; the comma-shaped pieces in particular accentuating the shoulders of the lower figure relate directly to ancient Persian models. The high relief modeling of the figures, on the other hand, recalls the naturalism of Greek and Hellenistic influence. On the projecting lobes in the lower portion of the piece, two rams' heads appear, each face framed by curving horns. This motif is common in the jewelry from this site and also seems to represent a local or nomadic motif. Strikingly, the sheath is also decorated by a pattern of repeated inlay swastikas, filled with colored glass paste originally bright blue in color. The swastika is a well-known ancient Indian symbol, associated both with the sun and its life-giving properties, and with auspiciousness. The sheath is further embellished with repeated turquoise inlay designs, predominately small heart shapes that were probably understood as leaf or petal forms. This motif is likewise very popular in the jewelry from this site and reflects nomadic taste and techniques. This object, then, is an amazing synthesis of diverse sources: Chinese, Indian, Greek, West Asian, Central Asian, and nomadic, a vivid example of the multiculturalism of this environment.