

Part I

Eurasian Archaeological Theory

“Scythian Triad” and “Scythian World”

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Abstract

Using mythologized archaeological terms such as “Nomadic Civilization” only destroys the historicism of archaeology and attaches superficial formality to the discipline. A strict, extremely cautious, and specially developed approach for the comparison of the archaeological data and written sources, however, could make archaeology more scientific and, hence, more historical. To escape from a network of ancient and modern myths it is necessary to create specific regional and special archaeological reconstructions on the basis of general taxonomic achievement. We need to think about the generalization of regional classifications and devise ways to bridge the different multidisciplinary historical and scientific approaches. In reality we have only two bridges that can be used to connect archaeology with the adjacent historical discipline; these occur on a chronological level and a geographical locus.

Key Words

Scythian World, Scythian and Sarmatian archaeology, cultural continuum and cultural horizon, “ethnic culture” and “culture of the ethnos”

Introduction

The richest kurgans that were excavated in the Northern Black Sea region during the 19th century were powerful catalysts for the development of Russian archaeology. Gorodtsov (1905, 1907), who investigated these kurgans, associated them with the historical Sarmatians, and initiated a new archaeological objective especially devoted to the ethnic history of the Sarmatians. Following Rostovtsev’s (1918b) brilliant research, this study has become not only a traditional, but also a classical element of Russian archaeology. Before World War II, Rau (1927) and Grakov (1947) formulated the basic theoretical generalization of the Scythian-Sarmatian period materials. These two scholars were not only the founders of the Russian school which studied Eurasian steppe nomads, but they also set the trends for future scientific research in the field. They defined the parameters for the research and supplied the inspiration to use archaeological material, not only for the development of typological classifications and chronologies, but also for ethno-geographic, ethno-genetic, ethno-social, and ethno-political reconstruction. The written sources of the ancient authors seemed to provide boundless opportunities that appeared to the researchers to be a solid foundation on which to base such reconstructions. The historiography of Scythian and Sarmatian archaeology has been of enormous interest to the discipline for both Russian and foreign scholars. Archaeologists in conjunction with classical historians, physical anthropologists, histori-

cal linguists, and art-historians have all taken part in this research. At the same time, however, the study has had its Achilles’ heel.

Early archaeological research on the steppe cultures

The first major and extremely magnificent finds of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age were made in the European steppes. A precise picture was drawn when these artifacts were compared with the data derived from written sources, since the sites located in the Northern Black Sea steppes corresponded so well with Scythian history. Finds obtained from synchronous kurgan excavations in the Volga-Don River region also corresponded to the Sauromatians of Herodotus, and kurgans dated to a later period were associated with the historical Sarmatians. With regard to the Sarmatian World, therefore, the discussion was basically directed upon the absence or presence of direct ethnogenetic connections between the bearers of the principal cultures of the four early nomadic groups: the Sauromatians, the Early Sarmatians, the Middle Sarmatians and the Late Sarmatians. Despite the appearance of a huge quantity of new archaeological data, this discussion has not diminished in importance at the end of the 20th century, and debate will continue into the next century. Moshkova (1989, 1991) has recently published historiographical sketches on Sarmatian archaeology that contain detailed information pertaining to the scientific theories and unsolved problems of Scythian and Sarmatian archaeology.

The origins of the “Scythians”

No one doubted the independent and autoethnic genesis of the Scythians who inhabited the Black Sea steppes, and the Scythian Culture was considered to be the ethno-political center for the early Eurasian nomads. Paleoanthropological data published by Debets (1948: 158) did not contradict this theory. Excavations of Scythian kurgans in the North Black Sea region have shown that male burials primarily contained three types of artifacts: weapons, horse harnesses, and items decorated in the so-called “Animal Style.” This complex of goods has been termed the “Scythian Triad” and it was considered to be symbolic of the ethnic Scythians. When discussing Scythian material culture during the 1950s, Grakov and Melukova (1954: 92–93) introduced the concept of the “Scythian Triad” into the discipline, and proposed that it should be considered to be a conditional symbol of an archaeological site left by the real Scythians.

Upon discovery of the Altaic burials in the 1930s and 1940s, such phrases as the “Altai culture and population of the Scythian period” appeared (Rudenko 1953, 1960). Following this ex-

ample, a direct transfer of the ethnonym “Scythian” occurred with reference to both the diverse typological and chronological aspects of the sites (Rudenko and Rudenko 1949; Tolstov 1961, 1963). At present, as was the case in the past, ethno-oriented clichés such as “Scythians” and “Scythoid Culture” are still frequently—and absolutely incorrectly—incorporated into archaeological publications, including popular editions (e.g. Alekhin 1989; Kozhin 1989; Kurochkin 1990, 1993). At the end of the 20th century researchers, in fact, continued the tradition of the ancient authors who used the ethnonym “Scythians” to denote the heterogeneous and multicultural conglomerate of steppes nomads as well as the stock- and cattle-breeders. The misuse of this ethnonym in archaeology has been a disservice to the science. It has created, moreover, a psychological basis for the theory that there was the existence of “unity” within the early nomadic cultures who inhabited the steppelands from the Danube to Mongolia.

In specific literature, the idea of unity was emphasized through a combination of terms and creation of phrases such as the “Scythian-Siberian World”, “Scythian-Siberian Animal Style,” “Historical Unity of the Scythian-Siberian World” and “Scythian-Siberian Historical-Cultural Unity” (Martinov and Alexeev 1986; Mogilnikov 1989). When it became necessary to prove unity, Herodotus’ text was drawn upon since he commented that the Scythians had come from Asia; current myth-makers have even added “from the depths of Central Asia.” If it had been possible to prove this version presented by “the Father of History,” as Herodotus has been called, researchers studying European early Scythian sites would have resolved some of their own regional problems. Specifically, the explosive development of the Scythian Culture in the Black Sea region would have been explained. An unsolved problem was the typological, chronological, and genetic parity of the pre-Scythian period and Scythian period (for a review of the data refer to Terenozhkin 1965; Leskov 1984; Klochko and Murzin 1987). This problem, which required careful and labor-consuming archaeological research at a regional level, would have been easily resolved by recognizing that the Scythian population had appeared in the Black Sea area as a complete and complex formation. Similarly, the issue of the origin of the Sauromatian Culture in the Volga River-Ural region would have been resolved—as is currently happening today (Zhelezchikov 1987: 12).

Terenozhkin and the scholars that belonged to his school, particularly Murzin (1986), supported the hypothesis that Central Asia was the origin of the Scythian Culture. This hypothesis required the correlation of chronological data. Archaeological sites from the western steppes that contained Scythian artifacts, such as Endzha, Belogradets, and Visokaya Mogila (High Grave) (Popov, 1932; Bidzilya and Yakovenko, 1974; Polin, 1987), had been dated to the 7th and possibly even to the end of the 8th century BC. Simple logic, therefore, demanded that “Scythian” sites situated deep in Asia should be dated much earlier.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Gryaznov (1980) excavated the Arzhan Kurgan in Tuva and discovered grave goods that were

very similar to those of the Scythians. An epic began in which, for the greater part of the next three decades, experts were pre-occupied with this excavation. Gryaznov believed that the kurgan had been constructed at the beginning of the 8th or, even as early as, the 9th century BC. The traditional chronology established for early Saka antiquities (7th–5th centuries BC) was evaluated and redefined by Kazak archaeologists (Akishev and Akishev 1978). Martinov (1996) has also joined them in the redating process, while Zhelezchikov (1987) and Ismagilov (1988) have maintained a close position regarding the origin of the western steppe Scythians. At present a number of Russian archaeologists, however, believe that the Arzhan antiquities should be dated to the end of the 7th or even the 6th century BC (Chlenova 1997).

Further events accrued like an avalanche. In order to recognize the Asian origin of the Scythians as recorded in Herodotus it was necessary to find archaeological sites in the steppes that belonged to the Cimmerians, the precursors of the Scythians. The discussion has intensified concerning the connection between concrete archaeological cultures and disparate archaeological sites belonging to the Cimmerians who were mentioned in written sources. Many scholars believe in the existence of a specific Cimmerian ethnos. Only pre-Scythian sites, and sites located in the Black Sea area, have been identified with the Cimmerians (Terenozhkin 1976; Alexeev *et al* 1993). European archaeologists had divided opinions concerning the identification of the Cimmerians with the diverse pre-Scythian antiquities. Discussion again surged concerning the chronological and typological connections between the cultures, and their place within other Late Bronze Age cultural formations. The discussion is far from over, and currently these experts have come full circle.

Problems of terminology

As it continued to be developed, the results of the Central Asian hypothesis surely would have surprised the theory’s founders. From using etymologically inaccurate terms such as “Historical Unity of the Scythian-Siberian World” and “Scythian-Siberian Cultural-Historical Unity” the innovators, who were experts in the field of eastern steppe archaeology, began to use even more capricious word-combinations such as “Civilization of the Early Eurasian Nomads.” The works of Martinov have made the most stalwart attempt to substantiate this concept. A special conference devoted to general issues of Scythian archaeology was held in 1992 at the Institute of Archaeology in Moscow, and the conference papers were published (KSIA 1993). The main conclusions of the conference were related to issues of the “Scythian World.” Members of the Scythian-Sarmatian Department of the Institute of Archaeology: A. I. Melukova, M. G. Moshkova, V. S. Olkhovsky, V. G. Petrenko, V. E. Maslov, N. L. Chlenova, and L. T. Yablonsky have been involved in field research and theoretical development. They have evolved independent typological classifications and chronological scales that have been developed on the basis of specific regional materials. These researchers have also questioned the chronological basis used for the hypothesis that the Scythians originated in Central Asia. They have postulated that

the earliest formation for both the Scythian and Saka Cultures could not have taken place before the end of the 8th century BC (Yablonsky 1998).

The scholars mentioned above who have worked to formulate special terms that can be used to denote the different early Eurasian nomadic cultures have been extremely unsuccessful, even from a logical point of view. In particular, the term “Scythian-Siberian World” is illogical because it connects etymologically discrete terms; the first refers to ethnicity while the second to geography. It has been suggested that the term “Scythian-Siberian World” should be replaced with “Scythian World.” This phrase is hardly scientific because it continues the ethnic terminology “Scythian” thereby labeling populations who could not possibly have belonged to the genuine Scythians since their genesis was unrelated to that of the population of the Black Sea region.

Raevsky (1993) has postulated the concept of the “cultural continuum.” Following his point of view, the complete name of the archaeological cultures that formed this “continuum” must be termed the “Eurasian Cultural Continuum of the Scythian Epoch.” It is possible to agree with the semantics of this term for it excludes both dangerous aberrations and ethnic contradictions. The term, however, has not become established in archaeological literature because of its length and complexity. In a review of Latin American archaeological materials, Bashilov (1993) has suggested the incorporation of the concept of “cultural horizons” in connection with the “Scythian World.” Similar material cultures and spiritual phenomena could cover various territories yet this terminology does not incorporate the connotation of “unity.”

The simplistic definition of “Scythian Triad” has become an ethnic symbol and, moreover, completely contradicts scientific fact; it also deliberately brings non-Scythian Cultures and elements into the Scythian Circle. “Triad” is, further, an ultra-ethnic category since it represents a sub-cultural prestigious sign belonging to peoples of different cultural and genetic origin (Yablonsky 1990, 1992, 1996). In order to explain the phenomenon of the “explosive” occurrence and rapid dissemination of material culture throughout the Eurasian steppes it is necessary to consider the basic models of cultural innovations. We know from ethnographic data that in the early stages of the development of a hierarchical society essential distinctions occur between members of the lower and higher social strata, particularly concerning rituals, values, and lifestyles. Gradually, social statuses became either completely detached from each other or poorly informed about the other. Under such conditions, material cultural artifacts that initially have a national origin began to lose their original utilitarian function, and over time develop a prestigious and symbolic nature.

As noted above, separate social layers of cultures can occur within the united ethnos. The ethnological terminology for this phenomenon is “culture of sub-socium.” Cultural innovations can occur in either of two ways; through invention or borrowing. The mechanism of borrowing, either utilitarian or sym-

bolic, was strictly dependent upon the function of transmitting the object. An object, itself, can carry ethnic attributes. Dissemination of items with utilitarian function is usually connected with marriage-family interrelations but, nevertheless, we believe that the majority of transmitted goods originated in the settlements. Any ritual phenomena, including the artifacts used in funeral rites, had symbolic significance and are usually found in burials. The innovation mechanism of prestigious-sign property has a special character. After arriving at the prestigious elite strata of the ethnos, the object is borrowed from one sub-socium culture to another thereby creating a chain reaction. At the beginning, only elite ethnic strata were involved in inter-ethnic contacts. It is important to mention that military leaders were the social group most frequently involved in this type of exchange. Data indicates that cultural innovations were spread neither in a straight line nor only “in a horizontal space” since they periodically moved “vertically” inside the system of ethnic social stratification. Their spread in the “horizontal” direction was extra-ethnic.

I believe that the “Scythian Triad” itself appears as a vivid example of prestigious sign attributes of the material and spiritual culture systems. It consisted of separate, but spiritually significant elements. When each of these elements are taken separately they would have only had a utilitarian role, but when they are united in the “Triad,” they acquired symbolical and religious prestige, in addition to having magical functions. Borrowing religio-magical attributes was facilitated when the universal character of some mythological concepts permitted perceiving “another” as semantically identical to “our.” When borrowing the technological system, however, many objective circumstances were required, such as an appropriate ecological climate that also includes a suitable social and psychological atmosphere. Even under appropriate conditions, the level of development as well as a similar economic-cultural orientation must be in place for specific cultural elements to be assimilated. It is not casually proven, therefore, that typological and technological analyses of each element composing the “Scythian Triad” in the different regions of the steppes, demonstrate traditional specificity in the execution of the singular elements of the Triad. This is true whether it be types of armament or the stylistic elements of the Animal Style. What is required is an evaluation of regional features, such as animal style images, types of arrowheads, and horse harness fasteners as well as the technologies involved in their manufacture.

The concept of “cultural horizon,” that replaces the less appropriate connotation of “community” and “unity,” works well also when we consider the archaeological materials concerned with the issues of the formation of the Sauromatian Culture.

Conclusions

Each steppe region reveals cultural and anthropological specificity within the general historical-stadium phenomena. The transition to the concept of “cultural horizons” or “continuum” also forces us to search for new methodological approaches when working with archaeological materials. In this context we should consider two themes; the first concerns the problem

of a parity between “ethnic culture” and “culture of the ethnos,” concepts that are not equal. The second theme is related to the problem of cultural horizon borders that may have coincidence, or lack of coincidence, in time and space. In the first place, the terminology “continuum” and “horizon” assume a continuous geographic distribution of certain cultural attributes. These attributes more often reflect the culture of the ethnos as opposed to the ethnic culture.

Ethnologists consider the term “culture of ethnos” to represent the entire complex of cultural property belonging to a given ethnos, an understanding that is independent of whether or not various elements of culture have ethnic coloring, or are ethnically neutral. In principle, the material culture of different ethnoses can include more or less similar artifacts due to their specialized functions. This would be true, for example, of artifacts that belonged to cultures with the same type of economy. The term “ethnic culture” is defined as the totality only of those elements and structures of the ethnos culture that actually have ethnic specificity, and that perform an ethnic partition in opposition to “we” and “they” (Kozlov 1979). Any ethnos, and phenomena that the ethnos includes, can be presented as a solidified constantly that supports the flow of synchronous and diachronic information that ultimately ensures the cultural adaptation mechanisms for each community. More often the specific attributes of an ethnic culture are the result of the synchronous flow of information that creates the optimum conditions for innovation. The attributes of the ethnic culture are supported by the diachronic movement of information and create the traditional community base. The synchronous information flow provides the variants of inter-ethnic dialogue, while the diachronic flow provides communication within generations that are the limits of a given ethnos, i.e. those traditions that stabilize an ethnos over time (Arutynov 1989). Secondly, strictly outlined borders of the distribution of cultural signs are naturally absent. The breadth of the horizontal review always depends upon the taxonomic level that we use in our classification. The simplified understanding of the models used in the historical processes are reflected in the idea of “historical unity.” To connect unconnected phenomena results in the development of artificial and far-fetched theories that, nevertheless, require significant effort to prove they do not exist.

In my opinion the main tasks of Scythian and Sarmatian archaeology are as follows:

- To develop special archaeological terminology, that is free from mechanical and often meaningless ethnic-terminological borrowings, i.e. “historical unity” and “historical-cultural community,” and replace them with a system of concepts that have archaeological and geographical semantics, i.e. “cultural horizon,” “cultural continuum,” “cultural region,” and “cultural district,” etc.
- To refuse to use ancient textual sources to *prove* archaeological concepts. It will be a psychologically difficult step to make these changes, but only by doing so might we defend Scythology and Sarmatology from methodological self-destruction. It is impossible to state this more appropri-

ately than Ivanchik (1996), an expert in the study of ancient texts, who wrote that it was premature to represent the identity of the Cimmerians with any archaeological culture before they are identified in the written sources. Essentially the term “Cimmerian Culture” as found in the archaeological literature, is more a conditional designation of the pre-Scythian Culture of the Northern Black Sea region. This term is the result of the uncritical adherence to the writings of Herodotus. The reliability of this story, however, is not at all obvious. Archaeological literature has no value in a historical study as, for example, in the matter of the Cimmerian problem. The research of historical texts should precede ethnic identification of archaeological sites and cultures. Otherwise the “Cimmerian Culture” has only a conditional character and its true connection with historical reality remains unclear.

- Using mythologized archaeological terms such as “Nomadic Civilization,” only destroys the historicism of archaeology and attaches superficial formality to the discipline. A strict, extremely cautious, and specially developed approach for the comparison of the archaeological data and written sources, however, could make archaeology more scientific and, hence, more historical.

- To escape from a network of ancient and modern myths it is necessary to create specific regional and special archaeological reconstructions on the basis of general taxonomic achievement. We have to develop strict, taxonomically verified, scientific classifications since there is no place for single-level taxons such as the “Andronovo Culture,” the “Alakul Culture,” the “Andronovo Community,” the “Sarmatian Culture,” the “Prohorovo Culture,” and the “Sauromatian-Sarmatian Historical Community.”

We need to think about the generalization of regional classifications and devise ways to bridge the different multidisciplinary historical and scientific approaches. In reality we have only two bridges that can be used to connect archaeology with the adjacent historical discipline; these occur on a chronological level and a geographical locus.

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Some Current Problems Concerning the History of Early Iron Age Eurasian Steppe Nomadic Societies

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Abstract

Ceramics, objects of everyday use, mortuary practices, and other indicators of ethnic and cultural similarity were significantly different within the societies that composed the so-called Scytho-Siberian World. These artifacts should be considered as cultural markers. The degree of affinity is discrete between the cultures composing the Scytho-Siberian World. A Cultural Horizon must be interpreted, not as Unity but rather as an "Eurasian cultural continuity of the Scythian epoch." Neighboring cultures are more similar within, yet they retain originality. This paper will demonstrate that the global historical process has general regularities that can be revealed in the human communities that existed in different times and space.

Key words

Scythians culture and its origin, Saka, Scytho-Siberian World, "horizon makers"

Introduction

Environmentally, the Eurasian steppe zone is a relatively monotonous, woodless landscape. The ecological characteristics unite such distant regions as the territory of modern Hungary in the west, and the plains of Mongolia far to the east. In the north the steppes are defined by tracts of the Eastern European forests and the Siberian taiga, while in the southwest the Black Sea coast and the Caucasus provide the boundaries of the steppe. Further east, the Caspian and Aral Seas, and the sands of the great Central Asian deserts as well as the Pamir and Sayan mountain ranges provide the more southeastern border.

During the period before the Scythian and Saka tribes appeared in the historical arena, Bronze Age populations of diverse genetic origins inhabited the vast steppe expanse. These peoples followed mixed farming-pastoral economies and were engaged in hunting, gathering, and river fishing. Domestic animals were bred and in some places plant cultivation was practiced using primitive irrigation systems, but neither animal breeding nor agriculture was the principal economy. The similarities observed among the material cultures of these populations were mostly due to generally comparable ecological conditions, levels of economic development, and the absence of serious geographic obstacles that could impede direct interaction between neighboring groups.

The "Scytho-Siberian World"

During the second millennium BC, the steppes of Eurasia were inhabited by two kindred populations that are today represented

by two major archaeological cultures: the Timber-Grave Culture (Srubnaya) and the Andronovo Culture. The zone of their initial contacts seems to have been the Volga-Ural region and the semi-desert areas south of the Aral Sea. The formative process of the Indo-Iranian language is considered to have taken place in this contact zone.¹

During the Bronze Age, the tools, implements of labor, and decorative objects were made of stone, bone, wood, and bronze. In the latter half of the second millennium BC the steppe population moved first within their traditional ecological zone, and then far beyond their original boundaries. Certain elements of the material culture characteristic of the steppe area appeared in various regions which extended from the Caucasus Mountains to the southern areas of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. A number of archaeologists and physical anthropologists support migration theories which envisage the occurrence of a long distance southward movement of people from the Eurasian steppes to Central Asia, northern India and the Iranian plateau during the late second millennium BC (Mandelshtam 1966, 1967; Potemkina 1987; Pyankova 1974, 1987; Yablonsky, 1996).

Paleogeographic studies provide material which suggests that increasing aridity, particularly in the eastern regions of the steppes, was among the causes of these population movements (Zdanovich and Shriber 1988). Large population groups pushed outwards in search of more verdant pastures for their cattle. The earliest finds of horse harness elements belonging to this period indicate that, at least by the Late Bronze Age, steppe dwellers could ride horses and were able to traverse considerable distances.

A life of ceaseless movement gradually conditioned a portion of the population to become specialized in nomadic livestock breeding. This process was asynchronous over the vast steppe area, and in some regions, especially where riverine conditions did not undergo significant changes, the previous traditional complex form of economy survived. By the 8th - 7th centuries BC, however, specialized stockbreeders had determined the main direction of the rapid ethnogenetic, political, and general historical developments of the steppe populations. Certain unions of stockbreeders became unusually active, the nomads became acquainted with the Eurasian steppes, and iron implements began to be used. Even at its initial stage, the Early Iron Age was marked by a sharp rise in the social development of stockbreeding communities that ultimately created a defined

social strata. A notable increase of material production and the evolution of a spiritual culture accompanied this phenomenon. Rapid perfection of the horse harness design and techniques of arms production were also noted, and armament types became more diverse. Nomadic ideologies were reflected in various artifacts decorated in the traditional so-called “Scytho-Siberian Animal Style.” An essentially undeviating burial tradition emerged in which deceased warriors were accompanied by a characteristic set of grave goods, including armaments and harness accouterments.

In Russian literature this complex of artifacts, being constant in time and space, has been termed the “Scythian Triad” (Grakov and Melukova 1954). The term “Scythian” was used because the first artifacts of this type were recovered from graves that probably belonged to the historical Scythians as described by Herodotus.

Excavation of Scythian graves in the steppes north of the Black Sea began during the 18th century AD, and an extremely rich variety of cultural artifacts, including numerous bronze and gold pieces with the most splendid artistic ornamentation, were found within kurgans (burial mounds). The results of the excavations provided a powerful impetus for the development of archaeology in Russia, and soon Scythology became a specialized branch of Russian archaeology.

Antiquities dated to the Scythian period, which originated from the eastern Transural steppes, first became known in Europe as a result of the edict issued by Tzar Peter the Great in the 18th century. In contrast, large scale scientific excavations of Early Iron Age monuments in southern Siberia and Central Asia only began in the 1920s and 1930s. Archaeological expeditions in various eastern steppe regions revealed the so-called “Asiatic Scythia” that certainly was not a remote and backward periphery of the “Scythian World.” The Asiatic Scythians, or the “Saka,” of the ancient Achaemenid Persian texts, were the creators of a powerful and original material and spiritual culture. As a result, a hypothesis was formulated which suggested that the European Scythians had arrived in the Black Sea steppes from the heart of Central Asia (Terenozhkin 1971).

This hypothesis was further supported by the three groups of facts: Herodotus reported that the Scythians had come to reside in the Black Sea area from the heart of Asia, and it was established archaeologically that some harness elements (typical Scythian-type materials) were earlier in date in the Asiatic burials than in their European counterparts. In addition, the Bronze Age European steppe population did not have the zoomorphic depictions of the type that were later defined as the typical diagnostic Scythian Animal Style ornamentation. In the eastern steppes, from the Yenisei River basin south into the Mongolian plains, some elements of the Animal Style are dated to the Late Bronze Age. These pieces are special animal depictions carved on stone stele which today are referred to as the *olenniye kamni*.

The theory of an eastern origin of the Scythians (indigenous theory) has both supporters and opponents. Opponents believe that Scythians were culturally indigenous to the Black Sea steppes, and genetically linked to the local Late Bronze Age populations (Grakov 1977), and paleoanthropological data does not contradict this assertion (Debets 1948; Alexeev 1980). With regard to elements of the Ani-

mal Style, adherents of the indigenous theory are of the opinion that the Scythians borrowed the principal motifs during their military campaigns to Near Eastern countries. Upon their return home they then proceeded to modify the motifs so that they conformed to their own specific ideological beliefs.

A third theory that favors a polycentric origin of the early steppe nomadic culture was formulated relatively late. This theory postulated an independent development of local variants of nomadic culture (Gryaznov 1978). Transformations, responsible for the development of the variants, occurred because contacts were relatively stable between neighboring groups of nomads, and the principal Animal Style themes were developed both independently as well as within the spheres of various influential centers. It was therefore possible for the cultural elements to be significantly different within diverse steppe regions (Rayevsky 1993).

A number of artifacts dated to the 10th - 8th and 8th - 7th centuries BC excavated from the North Black Sea region inspired the conclusion that during these two periods powerful nomadic impulses coming from the east of the Volga River strongly influenced Eastern European steppe cultures (Murzin 1990). If this point of view is correct, it explains the marked typological similarity between some Early Iron Age material cultural elements belonging to the populations of both the eastern and western steppe zones. The interpenetration of such artistic elements was possible only because the steppe stockbreeders had inherited kindred cultural and historical traditions from the previous Bronze Age populations. In addition, these later groups lived in comparable ecological circumstances largely responsible for their economic and military-political activities. Moreover, they had reached a similar level of socio-economic development.

Current archaeological studies indicate that during the first millennium BC the Eurasian steppes and the adjacent forest-steppes hosted populations who have left archaeological materials similar to those of the original Scytho-Siberian World. The “Scythian Triad”, consisting of weapons, harnesses, and objects decorated in a specific animal style, is characteristic for all of these cultures. In addition, bronze cauldrons and *olenniye kamni* are occasionally included among the unifying elements.

The question of unity between the cultures of the “Scytho-Siberian World”

The existence of the archaeological phenomenon known as the “Scytho-Siberian World” has been interpreted by some researchers as an indication of “unity” between all steppe populations in Eurasia. A number of scholars have even gone so far as to suggest the existence of a “nomadic civilization” that included state formations which corresponded to the cultural groups (e.g. Martinov 1996).

The similarity of certain cultural traits within a vast territory is not unique in the world of archaeology. During the

1940s the first methodological interpretation was made of Central Andean archaeological materials, and five cultural horizons which covered the Peruvian coast highlands and part of the Bolivian Altiplano were identified (Willey 1948). The wide distribution of certain artistic styles or similar methods of pottery decoration were included among the indicators for the different horizons. Unifying elements of each Andean horizon were referred to as “horizon makers.” Applying the methodology used for the Andean cultures to those of the Eurasian steppes, it is clear that the concept of cultural horizons is applicable to the phenomenon of the Scytho-Siberian World. The Scythian Triad in addition to a number of other artifacts may be considered to be “horizon makers.”

The concept of Scytho-Siberian unity continues to remain very popular and has a wide distribution which leads us to look for a methodological system suitable for its analysis. Two levels of investigation must be differentiated: the archaeological phenomenon and its historical interpretation.

Returning to Central Andean archaeology further studies revealed that it was necessary to modify the original cultural horizons. Two horizons, based on the similarity of ceramic decorative methods, were soon rejected and they only remained significant as chronological indicators. Three other horizons nearly met the same fate. Detailed investigation of the archaeological materials revealed an inner heterogeneity but, at the same time, it demonstrated that they were again only significant as chronological markers. At present, only three horizons—Early, Middle and Late—exist in the periodization of Central Andean prehistory as specific epochs in cultural-historical development (Rowe 1960).

An analogy to this process may be seen in the study of the Scythian Triad. Results of archaeological investigations have indicated that components within all regions of the Scytho-Siberian World are not equal. Their similarities are only very general and they demonstrate noticeable spatial differentiation that is completely dependent upon the cultures included in their world. Selected horizon makers must be analyzed within their individual time frame because each shows a great variability over time and space. Using pottery as a criterion, or any other object not included among the horizon makers, it is apparent that every culture within the Scytho-Siberian World has its own specific appearance. As discussed above, this individuality does not permit us to consider the Scytho-Siberian material culture as unified. A cultural horizon, previously considered to be unified, has a tendency to become disarticulated when its diverse development over time and space becomes more clearly understood.

The historical interpretation of cultural horizons is more complicated. During the early steps of accumulating knowledge, horizons can be explained in rather straightforward terms which relate, for example, to migrations, conquests, and the existence of empires.

As archaeological information is accumulated the situation changes, as can be clearly seen in the case of the Central Andes.

It is now apparent that the Late Horizon is coupled with the Inca Empire. By analogy with the Late Horizon, the Middle Horizon was previously considered to be an indication of the existence of the Wari or Tiahuanaco Empire over a vast culture-historic area. The highland Tiahuanaco and Wari Cultures were related, but they each had different historic destinies; the former was restricted to the northern Bolivian Altiplano yet its influence was also clearly seen in northern Chile and northwestern Argentina. The Wari, in contrast, spread its limits very far beyond its original realm of the Andean valleys and an authentic ancient empire may well have been established in all of these regions. The strong Wari influence on Peruvian coastal cultures probably came about because these people were intent upon spreading religious beliefs, as opposed to the imperialism of the mountain populations. Dividing the Middle Horizon in time and space, therefore, has demanded a special interpretation for each particular region and stage.

The Early Horizon, previously considered to be the result of strong Chavin religious and cultural influences, also disintegrated over time and now needs to be completely reconsidered within the context of previous cultural evolutions.

Conclusions

This study has revealed that the historical interpretation of a cultural horizon must be undertaken within the context of a concrete and detailed analysis of the archaeological content of that horizon. In addition, it is evident that a summary approach usually leads to superficial and erroneous interpretations. The former approach must be followed when attempting to determine the extent of unity among steppe cultures. The only concrete and detailed approach prevailing in current research focuses on the early history of the Scythians while, in contrast, this methodological approach is less characteristic for the archaeology of the Asian Scytho-Siberian World. At the present time, a complex and specific cultural development and composition is being revealed for the Sauromatian and Sarmatian tribes. In the vast territory of Kazakhstan, Siberia and Central Asia, the period of primary accumulation of archaeological materials is still continuing. It is apparent that the disparity of our knowledge about these sizable areas precludes any interpretation of unity throughout the Eurasian steppes.

To date, the Scythian Triad has been the principle unifying element among the steppe cultures. Other artifacts, however, clearly had prestigious significance and were particularly associated with the upper levels of nomadic society (Yablonsky 1996). In addition, these artifacts were distributed well beyond ethnic boundaries. They cannot, therefore, be considered to be suitable for use as “an index of resemblance” in determination of cultural unity. In contrast, ceramics, objects of everyday use, mortuary practices, and other indicators of ethnic and cultural similarity have been shown to be significantly different among the societies that comprise the so-called Scytho-Siberian World. Such objects should, therefore, be considered to be cultural markers.

migrations in small groups would probably have also contributed to the development of these cultural similarities.

The degree of affinity is discrete between the cultures which comprise the Scytho-Siberian World. A cultural horizon must be interpreted, however, not as “unity” but rather as “Eurasian cultural continuity of Scythian epoch” (Raevsky 1993). Neighboring cultures are more similar within, but they still retain their originality. The particulars discussed above show that global historical processes with general conformities can be revealed in social communities and, in addition, that they existed in discrete time and space.

Endnote

1. This is only one of several hypotheses about the place and time of the Indo-Iranian language origin (ed. note)

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Some Notes About the Material Culture of Eurasian Nomads

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Abstract

Nomadic societies are traditionally regarded as asymmetrically represented by their material culture (objects). Meanwhile, some of the artifact categories are highly meaningful. The basic characteristics of nomads as revealed by ethnography do not always find a correlation in archaeology. Dealing mostly with material objects, archaeology claims to identify the relationships that exist between artifacts, social interchange and power, and cultural identities and ideology. These are of great importance for the investigation of nomadic cultures.

Keywords

material culture, archaeological interpretations, early nomads, kurgan reconstruction

A few words about culture in general

The material culture of a society constitutes a substantial part of the culture and it is organically connected with the other substructures of a given society, including the “non-material” ones. At the same time, “material culture is both the product of human purpose and yet it is material following the laws of the non-human world” (Hodder 1992: 11).

It is sometimes difficult for us to understand a contemporary culture that pertains to a different cultural system. This difficulty increases immeasurably when one must assess a culture that is distant in time by several centuries or millennia. Voluntarily or not, we approach this distant culture using our own criteria and psychology. These embody a great number of concepts of “culture” that reflects the perception of “things,” which, it would seem, are familiar to everyone. Attempting to speak the language of a different culture, we discover, with surprise, that very often we can neither understand this culture nor ourselves. These circumstances are further demonstrated by two opposing viewpoints that attempt to assess the ability of archaeology to obtain information from a fossilized culture. The adherents of the first point of view believe the potential is very limited because archaeology mainly deals with “dead” things, and extrapolating information from ethnographic material to interpret archaeological information is inadmissible and senseless because of the differences in time between the past and present. The followers of the second point of view are conversely sure that the cognitive potential of archaeology is infinite. Obviously, both perceptions are extreme and the truth lies somewhere in between.

In principle, the research of prehistoric cultures remains an attempt to unravel a crossword puzzle composed of known words but using unknown rules. We may be able to partially understand; this possibility lies in the general uniformity of the development of humankind. Certain common phenomena exist in most cultures, i.e., symbolism of the color triad, white-red-black (Terner 1983); or magic, the number seven, the opposition of right and left, up and down, and even and odd. All of these are deeply connected with the psycho-physiological aspect of the human organism (Ivanov 1978). One can also distinguish some features inherent in the cultures of discrete “Worlds,” i.e., Hellenistic, Christian, and Scytho-Sarmatian, etc. “Since the cultural occurrences are regulated relatively well, it is possible to relate certain objects under study to the more narrow multitude of some given class of events which we know” (Dubrovsky 1979, author’s translation).

Material culture and culture

In the study of material culture one uses several methodological approaches, beginning with the general definition and understanding of a “culture,” as well as a theoretical orientation, i.e., cultural-historical, processual, post-processual, and others. For instance, one “cultural” or processual approach provided by ethnology or cultural anthropology offers some variations of the so-called “systemic” theory of culture, on the basis of which the concept of “human activity” (in the Russian version) and “behavior” (the Western) has been put forward. Many Russian archaeologists were educated on the definition suggested by Markaryan (1972) who wrote that human activity is socially oriented, and culture is a way of its realization. It includes also the results of such an activity. Arutynov (1989) has distinguished four spheres of culture: Production of material values, means of subsistence (habitat, food, and clothing), social and normative subculture (law, ritual, and religion), and humanitarian sub-culture (knowledge, art, and experience, etc.). These spheres constitute the totality of cultural structure. A semiotic approach suggested by Russian scholars during the 1970s defined a culture as a “non-inherited memory of the collective” (Lotman and Uspensky 1971: 146).

As Golovnev (1995: 21) has suggested, human activity is realized in two basic spheres: Natural (environment) and social. Economic activity is connected with “human-nature” relationships, yet “human-society” relationships are realized in the

social sphere. Ecological and material subcultures serve as a means of economic activity; social activity is attached to normative and spiritual subcultures. For traditional (archaic) cultures, it is difficult to separate their material and spiritual components. Material objects personified people in their life; therefore, frequently people were buried with their personal belongings. During prehistory, the initial spiritual content of any material object was high, but the material content was very low. Later, because of greater technological specialization, the producer of an object and the consumer were further separated. Before craft specialization was established, the material sphere was closely connected with the ecological sphere (Golovnev 1995: 24-26).

One may say that archaeologists deal with material objects in everyday practice, either through their classification, the development of detailed typologies, or attempting to scientifically interpret these assemblages. Archaeologists must apply various scientific methods for an objective interpretation of material culture. Questions concerning the relationship between living cultures are intricately related to archaeological expression and understanding. These are, in fact, the main questions revolving around archaeological interpretations and they divide archaeologists into various groups who ask different questions. What should archaeologists do? Deal only with material objects and their preparation for future historical interpretation (Klein 1978), should we be anthropologists? (Binford 1962), or should we interpret the material culture multivocally and contextually? (Shanks and Hodder 1995).

Material culture and archaeology

It is true that many explanations of artifacts are still subjective. "The artifacts studied by archaeologists tell us about the history but not in the language of historians" (Hodder 1992: 11). If the basis of the equation between a material culture complex and social grouping is ambiguous then much of the archaeological interpretation must remain subjective, even at this fundamental level of operation (Shanks and Hodder 1995). The basic principles of this approach relies on the symbolic meaning of any artifact. In particular, this appears to be quite realistic when we speak about the Eurasian nomadic Animal Style of art. Some of its categories are highly meaningful; therefore, the Animal Style is justly considered to be a semiotic system that existed within nomadic societies (Rayevsky 1985).

Dealing primarily with material objects, an archaeologist claims to identify the chronological context of artifacts, and to determine between the artifacts the social relationships and power, cultural identities, and ideology. All of these are of great importance for the investigation of nomadic cultures because of their distinguishing characteristics.

Some controversies with the definition of nomadism

In our efforts to construct a profile of the nomadic material culture we cannot expect quick and easy results. In fact, herding as a special kind of activity requires virtually no tools (Cribb 1991). Attempts to identify nomadic cultures by using a cer-

tain material complex have rarely been successful. The same can be said about the evolution of nomadism. Ethnography indicates that pure nomadism is extremely rare. According to some Russian scholars, the specifics that indicate a nomadic mode of life are as follows: A portable house, a good saddle with stirrups, light equipment, and extensive animal breeding with annual herding. The basic pattern of nomadism provided by ethnographic examples, however, does not always find a correlation with archaeology. Besides, nomadic societies, represented by their material objects are traditionally considered to be asymmetrical. This situation has produced a number of common controversies.

The first controversy is produced by the different definitions of nomadism and pastoralism as well as the different interpretations of an archaeological complex. In the first place, it concerns an interpretation of some cultures of the Eurasian Bronze Age in terms of nomadism. What are the commonly accepted archaeological markers of Eurasian pastoral nomadism? These include a kurgan burial ground; the relative absence of permanent settlements and houses or the presence of camp sites; the absence or a very limited scale of farming; wheeled transport; and the bones of animals who were capable of traveling long distances and grazing all year round, and artifacts which would have been used for exploitation of these animals. Another problem is that frequently the sedentary population could use many components of the so-called "nomadic" material complex, and vice versa (Cribb 1991). During the Iron Age the complex of "nomadic" weapons and horse harnesses was widespread over a vast portion of Eurasia, for example, including the forest-steppe and even the forest zones. The only artifacts that can be used to separate the cultures attached to the different landscapes are pottery and settlements. Some of the latter are located in marginal zones that could have served as communication points, and could also have comprised a concentration of various populations, including those that were nomadic.

Investigating nomadic material culture

Nomad material culture may be ethnographically defined as having three main characteristics: (1) Site furniture (fixtures or portable objects), (2) durable or perishable objects and, (3) valuables or expendables (Cribb 1991). The widespread use of clay pottery is highly characteristic for early Eurasian nomads; almost every grave held some quantity of handmade earthenware. It should be noted that those vessels made on a potter's wheel were usually imported from the region of a statehood. As recent research shows, nomad's vessels could contain ordinary foods, such as milk, meat broth, and *kasha* (cereal or grain) (Koryakova and Daire 1997). The bronze cauldrons usually associated with unique burials contained animal bones that originally consisted of meat which was placed in the burial. The abundance of pottery in the burial, an item that could easily be broken and was especially vulnerable during migrations, provokes a fair question about its place within nomadic material culture. Indeed, we cannot answer this question fully because we do not know the complete content of the material culture, and because a substantial part of this complex was made

from organic materials that are generally not preserved. Fortunately, we are able to make inferences from the ideal examples provided by the frozen tombs of the Altai nomads. It is known that these people produced many utensils made of wood (dishes, mugs, bowls), birch bark (boxes), and leather (some types of jar) (Rudenko 1960; Kubarev 1987; Polosmak 1994). An interesting question that has not been discussed relates to the method by which Eurasian nomads organized the manufacture of pottery and its preservation from breakage during transmigration. They could have manufactured it either in the summer camp or at the winter house, although the technology and organization of production would have been different in each locale. As our experiments have demonstrated, it is not difficult to make pottery in summer even when there is a paucity of wood (Koryakova and Fedorov 1993). It takes approximately 1.5 hours to make a pot and an additional 3–10 minutes to decorate it. According to ethnographic analogies and experimental archaeology, dried and pressed dung, abundantly available, is more than sufficient fuel to fire ceramics, and it would have been necessary to use wood only very minimally. Dried and pressed dung fires up very quickly and maintains its temperature for a long time. Firing occurs without flames with temperature reaching approximately 900–950 degrees for a duration of 2–3 hours (Koryakova and Fedorov 1993: 92-93).

It should also be noted that quite frequently nomads used pottery produced by sedentary populations; for instance the Sarmatians of the Don and Volga areas are known to have obtained some of their pottery in this manner. During the 8th–7th centuries BC, the nomads in this region only had temporary camps in the open steppes although they also had stable settlements in the forest-steppe. Very often the latter were defended by fortifications (Medvedev 1999), and many times the forest served as a place of refuge.¹

Frequently, and especially in Western publications the assumption is made that the Andronovo and Srubnaya (Timber-Grave) Cultures were nomadic. On the contrary, the material culture complexes of these societies produces evidence of a more complicated economic structure than that which existed in the Eurasian steppes. During the second half of the second millennium BC, the economy, as seen in the archaeological materials of the populations, was not culturally homogeneous, although it appeared to have been quite similar over this huge geographical region.

As we have seen, nomadic material culture is characterized by some specifics that are recognizable as ethnographic models. In terms of economic and cultural types, Russian ethnographers have put forward the concept that certain varieties or degrees of nomadism existed—vagrant, semi-settled, semi-nomadic, and nomadic, etc. All of these types of nomadism were known historically, yet if we look at them from the point of view of their material culture, we will not notice any great differences between them. This illustrates the principal archaeological problem - the necessity to recognize the variety of nomadic types found in the archaeological assemblages.

If we have the remains of large settlements which consists of dozens of large houses, as is the case for the Andronovo Culture, how may we speak about the nomadic character of this culture? In my opinion this is impossible, and it is valid only to speak of nomadic pastoral tendencies and not about a nomadic mode of life that was more characteristic for the steppe inhabitants during the Iron Age. The question is, to what extent can we evaluate certain key distinctions in production, mobility, and settlement in prehistoric pastoral and agro-pastoral cultures. It has been suggested in the literature that the search for a fully nomadic society should be abandoned in favor of an approach that will recognize nomadic tendencies that were manifested in varying degrees throughout a wide range of societies. It is true that nomadic pastoralism consists of pastoralism and nomadism. The greater the degree of pastoralism, the stronger the tendency toward nomadism (Cribb 1991).

The pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppe, known in the literature as the “Ancient Nomads,” had a kurgan funeral ritual that has been described many times in numerous publications. Yet, we still do not have any definitive explanation of the ritual’s role in nomadic societies, or the processes and circumstances of the mortuary construction. Only a few pieces of research have been devoted to these problems. The huge kurgans of the Scythians, the Sarmatians, and other ancient nomads which contain the remains of large wooden (sometimes stone) funerary chambers are well known. Obviously, the erection of such constructions required a large labor investment, and the use of a great deal of wood, an item usually not easily accessible in the treeless steppes. Previously, we have treated such structures as evidence of social stratification. Some of famous Scythian funeral complexes appear to have been reused repeatedly and could be considered to be the permanent houses of nomadic people. As has been observed in the Pazyryk Culture, some logs from permanent living quarters were reused in the construction of the funerary chamber. An upper covering placed above the funeral room in Kurgan 1 of the Ak-Alakha Cemetery, for example, comprised the logs from a demolished polygonal house (Polosmak 1994: 13). This finding may suggest that the nomads had quite solid winter houses in the locales where the weather was particularly severe. As Polosmak writes, the Ukok Plateau was treeless, but the Pazyryk people used a large amount of wood in their funerary constructions. They could have transported it from the nearest forest during winter by pulling it across the ice, as has been undertaken during recent times. Dendrochronological analysis has shown that all of the logs used for funerary chambers were felled during the winter (Polosmak 1994: 14). These are all arguments to indicate that the most sophisticated funerary constructions could have been built in advance, but that this would only have been possible in more or less stable ecological and political conditions.

As is well known, the kurgan was not only a functional mortuary construction, it was also a complex architectural structure which reflected the specific artistic or cosmological ideas that existed within a given society. It is for this reason that it is possible to note the typological variety of inner kurgan constructions within the vast steppe and forest-steppe zone

(Gryaznov 1961). Many archaeologists focusing on the Eurasian kurgans of the Iron Age have pointed out that large kurgans usually occupied the highest point in the landscape, and are visibly connected to other large kurgans forming a chain that can stretch for 5–10 kilometers. Smaller kurgans are also included within these complexes. This system of kurgan locations could have played a role as marking points in nomadic communication systems. Single kurgan burials generally located in watersheds, and situated in the open steppes at a more or less significant distance from a river, appear only at the beginning of the Iron Age. They differed from the kurgans of the Bronze Age that are usually located in groups along a river terrace (Zdanovich *et al* 1984: 41). Some research on the reconstruction of kurgan structures had been undertaken by several groups of archaeologists, particularly in northern Kazakhstan (Zdanovich *et al* 1984) and in the southern Urals (Tairov and Botalov 1988). In the first case detailed paleosol analyses permitted scholars to conclude that large kurgans, such as Kara-Oba and Obaly in northern Kazakhstan, were built from rectangular blocks of topsoil which formed bricks. The authors reconstructed the construction sequence for a kurgan in the following manner:

“Initially, a place suitable for burial was chosen. It should be situated near a pasture, not far from a water source, and certainly on the elevated and forestless steppe ground. The place for the burial mound was outlined by a shallow, wide ditch, the soil from which was placed on the inner side. Then ceremonies—the traces of which could be noted by the changed character of paleosol and the remains of organic materials such as grass or brushwood—were performed. After that a grave pit was dug. The large amount of soil taken from the pit was distributed around it, and a smaller amount was spread further out within the defined area. A circular moat with a smaller diameter than that of the ditch was constructed from humus loamy soil. The burial was completed and part of the soil was returned to the pit. The ground surface within the pit was covered with brushwood and filled with soil. The top level of the construction was covered with the topsoil blocks. And finally this construction was plastered with clay extracted from the ditch” (Zdanovich *et al* 1984: 43-44). The average volume of soil removed from the ground surface of the interior of the concentric area was approximately 2100 sq m.² According to the calculations of the authors, the labor necessary for only the construction of the mound required 200–400 individuals for 10 days, or 70–140 individuals for one month. If we add the work necessary to complete the funerary chamber (woodcutting, transportation, etc.), digging the ditch, and the other operations, it is apparent that the erection of such a large kurgan would have been very laborious. The kurgan Kara Oba was in the form of a truncated stepped cone, with a height of 4 m (Fig. 1) (Zdanovich *et al* 1984: 46-47). Mathematical calculations applied to the Varna Kurgan, located in the southern Urals, and the results of its experimental reconstruction indicated that this three-tiered round construction had a height of 5.7 m and an upper diameter of 1.6 m (Fig. 2) (Tairov and Botalov 1988: 112-113). These two examples allow us to imagine what a grandiose impression these constructions would have made.

Kurgans are also considered to have marked the territorial boundaries of clan or family lands (Polosmak 1994: 14). Until recent times, the Kazaks and Kyrgyz buried their deceased only near winter pastures (Rudenko 1952: 9-10). According to Dyakonova’s data, the Tuvians buried their deceased in the areas of traditional transmigration. Therefore, members of a clan could be buried in different cemeteries (those of winter or summer) within the clan territory (Dyakonova 1980). If we admit that such a system would have existed in prehistoric and proto-historic times—and this appears to be quite credible—then we should ask if we could identify discrete cemeteries that belonged to a specific clan group? Archaeologically we would consider these to be separate units within one or another archaeological culture, while the problem is to identify them with a specific social group not only culturally but also as a component of the social landscape.

Ethnographers and archaeologists consider horse harness accouterments to be a prime marker of the nomadic mode of life—a horse bit in a grave and special horse burials are widely known throughout the nomadic territory from the Iron Age to the Medieval period. In the Sargat Culture, for example, one out of every two graves yielded the remains of a horse harness (Koryakova 1988). The horse harness is one of the typical chronological indicators of a nomadic culture. In contrast, during the Bronze Age the frequency of any object associated with horse transport was quite limited. Wagons and chariots, and bone cheek pieces were, however, characteristic for some Eurasian steppe cultures of the Middle Bronze Age. Yet the question is, are we correct to interpret the finds of wheeled transport as evidence of a nomadic mode of life, and consequently as evidence of economic migration?

Conclusion

This paper has been aimed toward a comparative view of a number of issues pertaining to nomadism, and a discussion of some particular aspects of these problems. Despite the long tradition of studying the material culture of Eurasian nomads, and the apparent simplicity of this topic, it cannot be considered to be well developed. It is very important to rethink our theoretical approaches to the study of nomadic material culture, approaches which have not developed since the 1960s and 1970s in Russia, and are also not well understood by western archaeologists. The paper has touched only a few of the issues and it is hoped that other problematic areas will be discussed within the framework of further “nomadic sessions” at the annual meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. This was also verified during my conversation with the Bashkir people of the southern Urals.
2. During the course of the excavation of the Skaty burial ground we came to the same conclusion (Koryakova and Dair).

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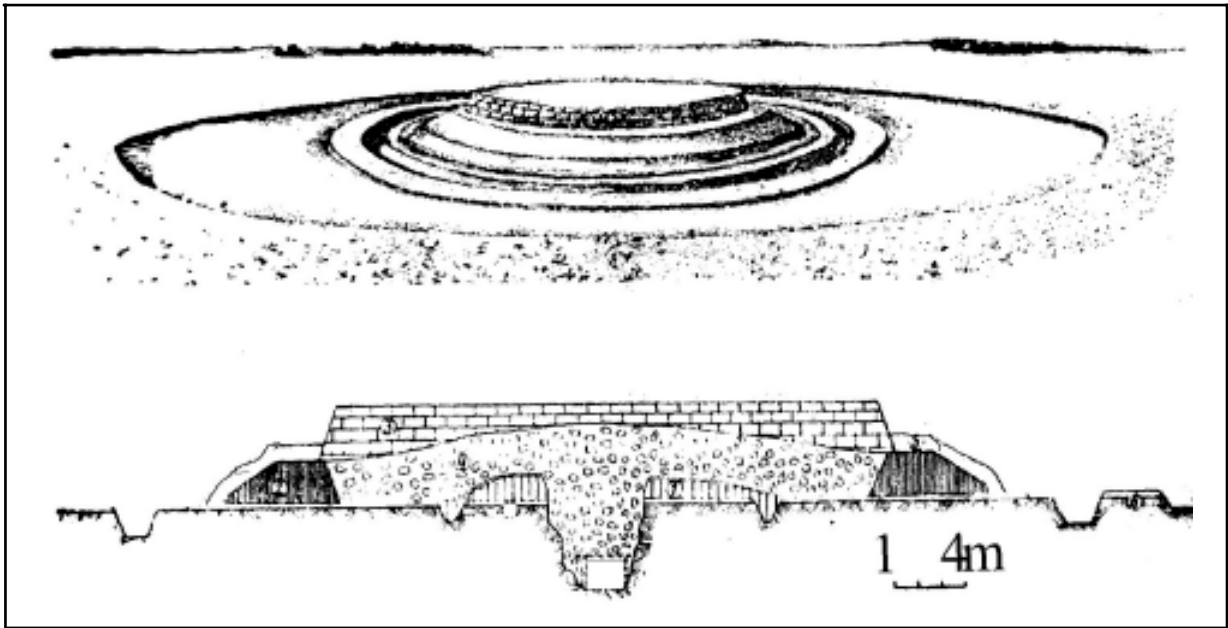


Fig. 1. Kara-Oba kurgan, northern Kazakhstan. Reconstruction of the surface construction. (After Zdanovich, et.al., 1984, plate 4.)

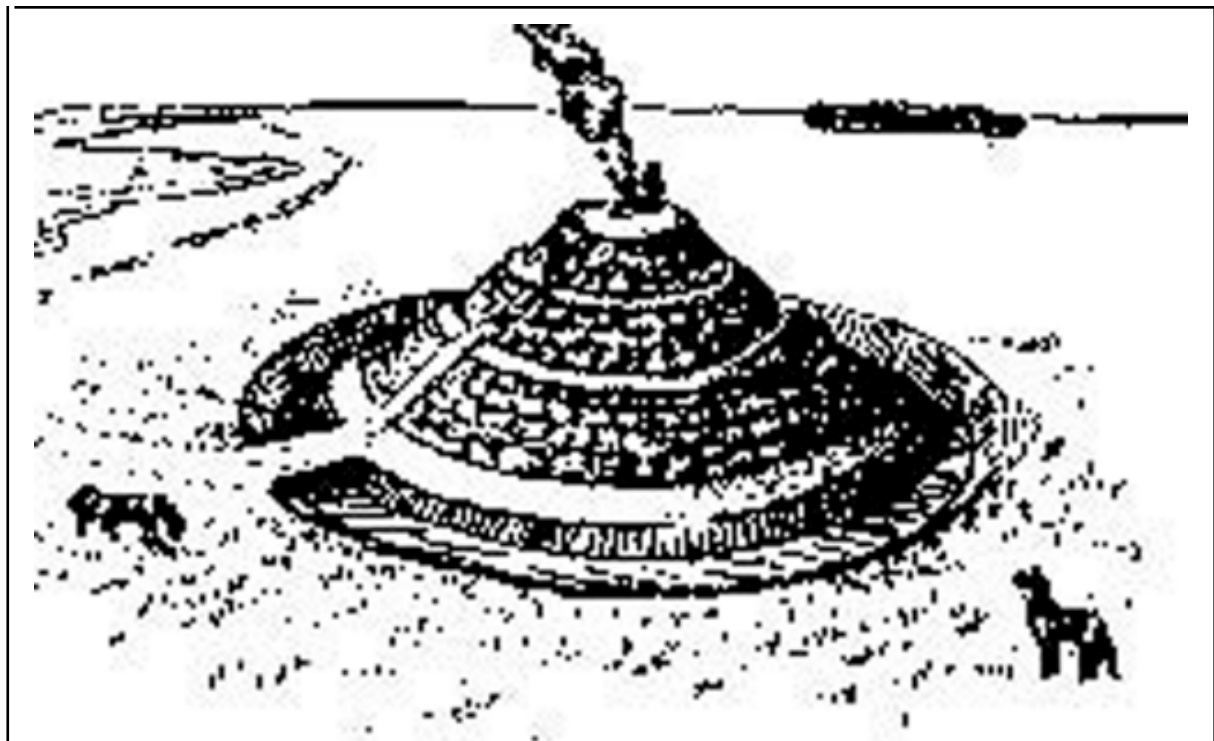


Fig. 2. Varna (South Urals). A variant of the reconstruction. (After Tairov and Botalov 1988, plate 7.)

Iron Age Nomadic Burials of the Eurasian Steppe

A Discussion Exploring Burial Ritual Complexity

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the analytical meeting point between archaeological theory, mortuary interpretation and a series of Early Iron Age nomadic burials from the Southern Ural region of Russia. The ensuing discussion addresses the complexity associated with interpretative frameworks, which attempt to frame societal organisation through the analyses of the variability associated with burial structure patterns and grave goods inclusion. Significant socio-cultural elements such as age, sex/gender categorisation and hierarchical rank and status relationships are discussed within the context of the material remains from a group of Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic burials at Pokrovka, Chernaya and Kardaielova.

Key Words

nomadic burials, mortuary variability, sex/gender categorisation, liminality, contextual archaeology

Introduction

The Iron Age nomadic groups of the Eurasian steppe have received an increased amount of Western literary attention in recent years. Scholarly investigations have focused upon the demographic movements and societal organisation of these past mobile pastoral peoples and resultant models have been developed to account for the historical significance of nomadic populations within the prehistory of the vast Eurasian Steppe region.

However, in consideration of the demographics and societal concepts of the first millennium BC and the transition into the Iron Age period much of the archaeological evidence to support varying theoretical propositions has been obtained from mortuary contexts, typically associated with the tumulus (kurgan) form of burial. This situation should quite reasonably draw heavy scrutiny, especially in lieu of recent analytical trends, which have progressively sought to raise the conceptual awareness associated with the complexity of burial interpretations and the theoretical frameworks surrounding such attempts. Therefore, this paper shall address these issues in the context of a discussion pertaining to recent approaches concerning the analyses of mortuary materials from Iron Age nomadic burials located in the southern Ural region of Russia (Fig. 1).

The purpose of the current paper will be to illuminate several important theoretical issues and questions which may be generated by an examination of these materials as they relate to a

mobile pastoral mode of subsistence and the socio-cultural dynamics associated with the nomadic form of societal organisation. The paper will conclude with an extension of the relevancy of these issues by way of a brief discussion of funerary materials recovered from a group of Iron Age Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic burials excavated at the Kardaielova and Chernaya sites located in the southern Ural Mountain region of Russia.

Previous approaches to mortuary variability

Material remains discovered through mortuary excavations have been the primary resource used by both Eastern and Western scholars in various attempts to reconstruct the societal characteristics of prehistoric nomadic groups. Significant issues relating to these inferences revolve around the problematic nature of burial variability and include important theoretical constructs such as the social rank, status and role of past societal members. The tools used in establishing these analytical constructs typically focus on burial types, grave good inclusion/non-inclusion (including quality and quantity of grave good assemblages), investment of materials and labour by the living in funerary structures, evidence of ritual, etc.

It has been argued that societal characterisations based upon the premise of this analytical framework are useful in developing a general understanding of the dynamics of a past culture, however, they do not accurately represent or acknowledge the complexity with which burial ritual and subsequent variability are composed. Therefore, it will be emphasised through the following discussion that a greater awareness of these components be interwoven within the framework of theoretical models which seek to approach an understanding of the complexity surrounding the variability of mortuary remains.

Kurgan burials and socio-cultural classifications

A recent article by Koryakova (1996) initiated reference to past analyses and broad scale characterisations of the mortuary sites located within the Ural mountain Region of Russia, which chronologically fall within the first millennium BC and the Eurasian Iron Age period. The categorisation of these burial sites are based upon a classificatory approach posited by Grach (1980), which relates to earlier socio-cultural organisation arguments put forth by Khazanov (1975). Within this scheme, one can find burials classified into four basic groups: (i) Royal Burials, (ii) Elite Burials, (iii) Ordinary Population Burials, and (iv) Dependent Population Burials (Koryakova 1996: 266-67).

This hierarchical arrangement posits a general model for societal stratification, again obtained through the interpretation of the variability associated with the material elements of the mortuary sites. Koryakova notes, “the social interpretation of burial sites is defined by several features. These include sizes of constructions above the burials, spatial organisation inside burials, composition, richness, and variety of grave goods, animal and human sacrifices” (Koryakova 1996: 249).

Within this theoretical scheme, one can see that the analytical reasoning employed by previous scholars is predicated upon the interpretation of burial material patterning. Societal organisation, and inferences concerning vertical relationships, are clearly developed from the characterisation of not only the size and complexity of the burial structure but also tied to an analysis of included grave goods. Arguably, theoretical approaches such as these presuppose a nearly direct correlation between the grave materials present and the respective deceased’s rank and status within the previous life. In other words, these attempts explicitly seek to frame vertical societal relationships believed to be present within past societies.

The problematic nature of approaches such as these correlates with the lack of awareness for such issues as: (i) the inherent and highly significant role of the living societal members and their respective choices within burial ritual practices, (ii) complex issues relating to sex/gender and age categories and their relationship to burial patterning, and (iii) the importance of the process of ritual with respect to the maintenance and perpetuation of culture and society.

Burial patterning and social status

A recent article by Davis-Kimball (1998) has rightly drawn attention to the need for a more unbiased attempt at the interpretation of burial ritual and grave good analysis. Specifically, Davis-Kimball has argued for an increased awareness for the role of status relating to women within the Early Iron Age nomadic groups. As she has stated, “archaeologists of the 19th and 20th centuries amplified the long-standing convictions that the Early Iron Age tribes were warring, strong patriarchal societies. Over the decades they continued to interpret kurgan burials from this point of view. In this world, women seem hardly to have existed” (Davis-Kimball 1998: 142).

As a response based upon this criticism, Davis-Kimball has developed a methodology for societal reconstruction of Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic groups based upon archaeological excavations undertaken between 1992 and 1995 by a collaborative American-Russian project at Pokrovka, Russia (Figs. 1 and 2). Davis-Kimball’s approach is formulated through an interpretation of associative grave good articles recovered from within kurgan burials. Based upon this material evidence she has postulated a categorised list of statuses for both female and male members of the Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic societies. The rationale employed for the development of statuses was achieved through the selective analysis of specific grave good items, with pottery, faunal materials, and iron knives being completely excluded (this will be further discussed

at a later point) due to their high frequency within the burials (Davis-Kimball 1998: 142).

To briefly summarise this approach, the general model proposed by Davis-Kimball (Ibid. 142) divides societal statuses as such: (i) hearth person, (ii) priest or priestess and (iii) warrior (ibid.: 142). The extension of this model, coupled with retrieved material articles found within the context of the burials, provides for the acknowledgement of the following statuses:

Males: (1) Warriors; (2) Male burials without (or very few) grave articles; and (3) Males buried with a child.

Females: (1) Hearth women; (2) Priestesses; (3) Female warriors and; (4) Warrior-Priestesses.

Within this proposed theoretical model, a strong correlation is developed between the type and quantity of various grave goods (e.g. weaponry, jewellery, toiletry items, portable carved stone or clay altars, objects with Animal Style art, etc.) and respective statuses. Clearly, through this analytical approach one can see that the reliance upon grave good assemblages is of utmost importance. In this approach, the burial and its material components provide a direct reflection of the status of the deceased at the time of his/her death within the early nomadic society. The burial variability which Davis-Kimball encountered (i.e. different grave good assemblage patterns), during the excavation and post-excavation analyses, were used as the foundation for the formulation of a hypothetical status division (hearth person, warrior, etc.) within the Early Nomadic societal organisation.

Theoretically, this approach correlates quite closely with the archaeological analysis by Koryakova discussed earlier in which hierarchical societal frameworks could be posited through the comparison of mortuary structures, type and quantity of grave goods, etc. Again, we are led to believe that there is a direct reflection of the deceased individual’s rank and status within the burial structure composition and representative grave good assemblage. Both Davis-Kimball’s methodology and the approaches discussed earlier are predicated upon an analytical basis that was quite favourable during the 1970’s and 1980’s and is still utilised by many scholars. However, recent developments within archaeological theory during the past two decades have brought to the forefront several important analytical elements that have been largely undisclosed in previous approaches.

Theoretical approaches to burial variability

It can be generally stated that the re-creation of past prehistoric societal organisation has often drawn heavily upon the interpretation of burial evidence. Hypotheses regarding past societal rank, status, and role have all been developed through the examination of material evidence in the form of mortuary structures, grave good assemblages, and skeletal evidence. The patterns of these approaches have closely followed the paradigmatic nature of the archaeological discipline, and have thus developed considerably over the course of the last few decades.

Through these varying approaches, the material evidence has been utilised as a sliding scale for societal status and rank, and is thus taken as a direct reflection of the position in life that the deceased held at the time of their death.

Over the past three decades Western scholars have been heavily influenced by the early work of key individuals during the formative period of the *New Archaeology* movement of the late 1960's and 1970's. One such important individual was A. Saxe, whose doctoral dissertation, *Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices* (Saxe 1970) had a strong impact with long-lasting implications on the way in which mortuary practices were viewed. Saxe's main premise pertained to the sociological significance¹ of burial and the relationship of this to issues such as competition for resources, frameworks for lineal descent, and the creation of separate formalised and bounded areas for burial ritual² (Morris 1991: 148). Saxe's substantial contribution was later extended by the work of Goldstein (1976), who applied and broadened Saxe's original contribution through the use of a broad-based cross-cultural approach.³ In doing so, Goldstein focused particularly upon the development of formal disposal areas by 'corporate groups', which Saxe had originally postulated, and sought to test this hypothesis cross-culturally. However, Goldstein's findings contrasted with those of Saxe, which prompted her reevaluation and subsequent modification of Saxe's earlier hypotheses. Concerning Saxe's *Hypothesis 8*, Goldstein suggested that the problem was the question of whether cultures with similar environmental and economic conditions will symbolise and ritualise aspects of their organisation in similar ways (Carr 1995: 122). As a result of Goldstein's clarification and extension of Saxe's work, widespread acceptance of this pattern of inquiry emerged and the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis became significantly influential within the *New Archaeology* movement.

Binford's work in the 1970's also added significantly to the emerging analytical treatment of mortuary remains during this period. In Binford's, *Mortuary Practices: Their Study and Their Potential*, it was asserted that there were significant associations between rank and status and their resultant reflection within the burial rite in the form of quality and quantity of grave 'furniture' and the nature of the grave 'facility' (Binford 1971: 232-233).

Taken in conjunction, the strategies offered by the Saxe/Goldstein and Binford hypotheses became the primary tools used in the study of mortuary practices and added greatly to the formulation of the *New Archaeology* and the subsequent processual movement (Chapman 1987: 202). Within this scheme, the primary goal concerning societal reconstruction was the 'fitting' of the evidence into a set of prescribed social typologies, based upon the early work of Service (1962) and Fried (1967), and seen as an evolutionary ladder of societal organisation based upon the concepts of a band, tribe, chiefdom, etc. (O'Shea 1984: 13; also see Tainter 1978 for discussion). This scheme emphasised the exploration of within group-differentiation as opposed to between-group differences as well as the assumption that

burial variability was a reflection of the variability within societal formation and organisation.

In summary of these approaches, as they pertain to the discussions from Koryakova and Davis-Kimball developed above, one can see that the reconstruction of past societal structures has substantially drawn upon mortuary evidence and has been constrained by particular theoretical patterning. Two significant points offered within this theoretical structure are:

- (1) A direct correlation of burial structure, location and grave good type and quantity to concepts of rank and status and within-group differentiation.
- (2) The utilisation of a societal framework based upon the evolutionary typology of the band, tribe, chiefdom and state as proposed by Service (1962).

In recent years there have been numerous arguments against the utilisation of this analytical structure for the reconstruction of past social organisation. Most notably, post-processual critiques formed during the 1980's and 1990's have been quite outspoken in their reaction against the usage of this type of methodology and have, by contrast, argued for a greater acknowledgement and appreciation for the complexity of burial variability.

Recent approaches to burial interpretation

Recent post-processual critiques have explored several issues key to the significance of burial variability interpretation. If we are to review the earlier analyses offered by both Eastern and Western archaeological interpretations regarding the types and quantities of burial structure and grave good inclusion/non-inclusion within the light of the new arguments, one can see that there are a host of factors which clearly deserve further analytical development. However, in the sake of brevity, the following discussion will focus upon three general theoretical areas which were noted earlier and which are clearly relevant to the context of discussion developed within this paper: 1) the role of the living within mortuary practices; 2) the role of burial ritual within the maintenance and perpetuation of society and, 3) the significant factors of age and sex/gender distinctions within burial representation.

1. The Role of the Living

Certainly, one of the key factors in many of the post-processual critiques is that the 'living' members of past societies are often only seen as 'passive' actors within rituality, or as Hodder has stated, "...individuals appear controlled by rituals according to universal expectations; there is no sense in which they actively manipulate and negotiate ideologies" (Hodder 1986:27). Thus, if we are to consider the active nature, and knowledgeable actions, of the living participants as they relate to an analysis of burial ritual practices the problematic nature of an interpretation of the symbolic nature of the materials (mortuary structure and grave goods) is obvious.

The key component to this argument is the emphasis placed upon recognizing the important role of the living within the

ritual of burial. Important socio-cultural relationships between the living and dead members of society are incorporated within the framework of mortuary practices. Thus, understanding the roles which the living adopt during the ritual phase of burial is of paramount importance, as Parker Pearson has noted, “funerary practices are products of ‘political’ decisions (or sequences of decisions) in which the corpse is manipulated for the purposes of the survivors. Their treatment of the deceased is conditioned by their perception of death and their relationships with each other as much as by their relationship to the deceased whilst alive” (Parker Pearson 1993: 203).

Thus one can see that the ritual of burial provides an important staging point for the ‘acting-out’ of certain societal relationships between the living members of a society in respect to the vacuum created by the deceased member or members of the society. Within this social sphere of contact, the ritual provides the framework for the living members of a society to restructure, reorganize and reaffirm social identities which have been affected through the death of one, or more of the societal members.

Therefore, the funerary ritual and its components (corpse, physical materials, rites acted out, etc.) can act as important ‘symbolic resources’ for the living (Barrett 1994: 112). In lieu of this, it can easily be seen that these ‘resources’ available to the living members of the society during the ritual of burial are open for possible manipulation in either a normative or individualized manner. In consideration of this, the interpretation of mortuary remains in the form of burial structure and grave good inclusion/non-inclusion becomes considerably more complex than the analyses discussed earlier, which sought to explain the variable nature of these issues as direct reflections of societal organization in the form of rank, status and role.

Regarding the issue of the deposition of grave goods within the burial, Dark (1995:92) has suggested that grave goods have various roles pertaining to the living (e.g. gifts to the deceased, debt payment, sacrifices and sentimental tokens) as well as the dead (e.g. providing entrance into the afterlife or facilitation of reincarnation).

Clearly, these suggestions by Dark only touch upon a few of the many possibilities of grave good selection and inclusion within the rite of burial. However, within this argument it is important to take into consideration the fact that the selection of grave goods reflects a specific ‘subset’ of artifacts taken from the variety of choices available from within the material culture signature of the respective population (Parker Pearson 1993: 207). Additionally, an awareness concerning the knowledgeable human agency responsible for the placing of the artifacts within the context of the burial must be acknowledged.

2. *Ritual and the Reproduction of Society*

The difficulty with interpreting burial evidence has been briefly touched upon above. Therefore, the next question may be how, in terms of all the possible socio-cultural factors identified with the ritual of burial, might an approach to an understanding of this process and the material residues left in the form of mate-

rial evidence be gained? One of the most generally accepted and useful foundations for this is Van Gennep’s (1960) concept of *rites of passage*. Composed of a tripartite system, this model seeks to apply a common structure to the transitional nature of all ritual activities. Within this approach, Van Gennep argued that there was an initial separation from one status, followed by a period of *liminality* and then a transition and re-incorporation into a new status (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 30). Through the structure of Van Gennep’s model one can come to terms with an appropriate generalization for the way in which rituality is ordered across a broad range of human responses and an awareness for the important social implications relating to ritual can be perceived.

Van Gennep’s concept of *liminality* is one that has undergone considerable elaboration and has fostered important implications regarding the interpretation of the rituality associated with burial practices. Turner (1969), Leach (1976) and Hertz (1960) have all extended the concept of *liminality* by drawing attention to the structural nature of this model as it relates to the relationships created between the dead and the living and the treatment of the corpse during this stage of the rite of passage. In consideration of this, the liminal phase can be seen as providing a structure for not only the relationships between the dead and the living but also among the living members of the community (see discussion below). This leads us then to see the action of the ritual, and the symbolic messages which are interwoven within it, as an important component in not only the reproduction and maintenance of society but in the reconstruction of it as well.

Giddens (1984) has specifically explored the issue of the *re-constitution* of society as it relates to the significance of individual human action within ritual. Within this framework of thought, importance is placed upon the structural and perpetual nature of ritual as it relates to the reproduction of society. As Garwood (1991: 13) has noted, this “...structure is inherently historical: social reproduction, far from being the unchanging continuity of social form, involves the perpetual reconstitution of society through practical discourses conditioned by the social and material relations that already exist.” Thus, we may perceive the ritual of burial as an act conditioned by a dynamic interplay between what may be seen as a structured framework for socio-cultural reproduction but one which is also at the same time significantly charged with symbolism (in the form of material culture) and open for both interpretation and manipulation by the human actors who are engaged within the practice of ritual.

In light of this discussion, if we are to apply this analytical reasoning to the interpretation of the kurgan burials discussed earlier, we can see that rather than the material culture simply providing an indication or reflection of the deceased individual’s station in life, we are instead left with a sense of the importance with which not only the burial site held to this previous culture but also the ritual which was staged as part of the *liminal* process. We can thus see the kurgan structure as being a significant socio-cultural focal point within both the physical and cul-

tural landscape, one, which figured prominently within the structure and reproduction of the structure within the past society.

3. Age, Gender/Sex, and Role Relationships

The third and final area to be discussed pertains to the importance of how archaeological inquiry approaches the issues of gender/sex, age and the concept of role in past societies. Clearly these issues have significant meaning within the investigation of burial evidence. If one of the primary goals of mortuary archaeology is to reconstruct past societal structure through recovered material evidence, the inherent strengths and weaknesses of such an approach should certainly be acknowledged.

As an example, if we are to review the discussion offered earlier surrounding Davis-Kimball's (1998) analytical models relating to the Pokrovka sites, regarding the reconstruction of statuses for the Early Iron Age Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic groups, we can see that the inferences and statistics are based upon the population uncovered in the Pokrovka mortuary sites. Yet, can we consider these burials to be an accurate indicator, or sample, of the Iron Age Nomadic culture they are taken to represent? Do the burials uncovered truly reflect the living members of the Iron Age community? Do they provide a characterisation of the various age-related categories one would expect to be represented by a general cemetery complex? Obviously the answers to these questions do not come easily.

However, it should be quite apparent that mortuary complexes can, and often do, reflect the burial activities of a select group or sub population that may not represent or reflect the totality of the respective culture. Particularly, one can see the issue of the lack of burial evidence for children and the elderly. As Chamberlain has cogently noted, "...there is now considerable evidence that most prehistoric populations had childhood mortality of at least 50%, and for a stable or slowly growing population this implies that at least half of the living individuals in any given community were children" (Chamberlain 1997: 249). There have also been similar biases concerning the representation and interpretation of the elderly age-set within burial evidence as well. Thus, one can see that there are indeed important factors to consider in the process of basing a societal reconstruction strictly upon burial evidence.

In regards to Davis-Kimball's research and interpretations from the Pokrovka materials, there is unfortunately no elaboration or development regarding age classifications within the burial evidence, only a notation that there were incidences of children being buried with males but never with females (Davis-Kimball 1998: 143). However, Davis-Kimball's subsequent discussion concerning the female burials does approach a clear redefinition of the common image given to the female members of the Sauro-Sarmatian culture and thus challenges the long-standing androcentric bias that has characterised much of the previous archaeological interpretation of these early nomadic groups. To extend this issue, it is important to acknowledge the significance of gender/sex categorisation within archaeological interpretation. In recent years there has been a great deal of literature devoted to the exploration and defini-

tion of the differences between sex and gender as well as attempts to separate the ambiguity, which surrounds them.

This topic can be seen to have particular relevance to Davis-Kimball's arguments as past research has shown that there is considerable ambiguity relating to gender-sex for both children and the elderly age-sets (Lesick 1997: 36). What constitutes 'maleness' or 'femaleness' can often be fluid during these age periods and, obviously, this has important implications for how we interpret either the inclusion or non-inclusion of children or elderly burials within the mortuary patterns of the Sauro-Sarmatian groups. Certainly, the lack of representation of these individuals within the burial record must be acknowledged and an approach to increased understanding sought.

The final point to be made is that of the significance of acknowledging the existence of role for individuals of the past. As has been touched on considerably thus far, reconstruction of past societal organisation has focused extensively upon the vertical (hierarchical) strata of the society. However, it may be argued that a proper framework for approaching this concept should also take into account that there are cross-cutting horizontal categories (e.g. sex/gender, age, kinship affiliation, etc.) pertaining to role as well and that these may also be reflected within the ritual of burial (Rega 1997: 229). In consideration of this, one must take into consideration that the lives of individuals, within both the contemporary and the past, are composed of structured relationships built around a series of multiple roles. It must therefore be the intention of the researcher to strive for an understanding of how these various roles are either represented or underrepresented within the material remains of the burial.

Therefore, as a final component to this paper, the discussion will now turn towards the burial deposition patterns relative to the unpublished excavations of the Kardaielova and Chernaya cemetery sites, undertaken by L. Koryakova in 1978⁴, in the Southern Ural region of Russia (Fig. 1 and 2). These Sauro-Sarmatian mortuary sites relate chronologically as well as geographically to the Pokrovka mortuary sites discussed above.

Kardaielova and Chernaya burial sites

The Kardaielova and Chernaya mortuary sites are represented by five kurgans with 21 burials representing 23 individuals. Temporally, the burials excavated within these sites follow the relative chronology system based upon artefact typologies established by B. N. Grakov (1947) for the Sauro-Sarmatian cultural history:

Sauromatian:	6-5 th centuries BC
Early Sarmatian:	4 th -2 nd centuries BC
Middle Sarmatian:	late 2 nd century BC
Late Sarmatian:	AD 2 nd -4 th centuries

(as quoted in Davis-Kimball and Yablonsky 1995: 18)

Although these sites are represented by a small number of kurgans and burials, which certainly does not offer a large enough sample to perhaps be statistically significant, there are

several interesting points which can be made relating to the arguments developed earlier regarding burial variability and the interpretation of societal organisation.

Kardaielova II

The Kardaielova II cemetery site was composed of three kurgan mortuary structures with Kurgan I containing no evidence of burial with only scattered associative artefacts (e.g. faunal remains, fragmented pottery, small bronze bell, iron objects, etc.) throughout the mound structure. The original site report (Koryakova 1979) postulated that this might have been a cenotaph construction and as a result of the associated artefacts it appears to have a relative date of the Late Sarmatian period.

Clearly, the nature of this construction, with its absence of burial pit features, hints at the overall significance of the cemetery complex and its position within the landscape to the past groups utilising it. The presence of a cenotaph type structure may correlate with the socio-economic structure of previous nomadic populations in that it certainly relates to issues of land use, concepts of territoriality and the overall mobile subsistence cycle which was part of the past nomadic way of life. It also speaks to issues concerning death and burial within mobile groups and how the living respond to the interment of the dead within chosen locales, possibly distant from normative and formal disposal areas.

The Kurgan II structure contained only one burial, that of a female (aged approximately 30-35 years) with numerous varied artefacts (Fig. 3). The artefact typologies suggest that it was a Sauro-Sarmatian type burial with a relative date of the 3rd-4th centuries BC. The burial complex associated with this kurgan was interesting in that it did not involve the use of a burial pit or grave structure. Instead, the corpse and grave articles appear to have been placed upon the surface of the ground, two small fire pits were dug and utilised near the corpse, and then the earthen mound structure was constructed over the body. In general, this particular burial can be seen to correlate with the Sauro-Sarmatian female burials at Pokrovka in that they share a similar range of artefacts. The fact that there was a wide variety of articles placed with the corpse, as well as it being a rather unusual single inhumation burial, does seem to suggest that there was a quite lavish and complex burial ritual performed during the interment of the individual.

Kurgan III contained six burials with a total of eight individuals (3 females, 1 male and 4 undetermined). The stratigraphy of this mound structure is also quite interesting as it clearly provides an example of the multicultural reuse of the mortuary structure with two construction sequences being represented. The kurgan earthen mound was composed of several strata with the primary mound phase being represented by a dark sandy loam soil and the second phase by a grey-yellow porous loam material. The central burial, associated with the primary phase of the mound, may be characterised as a burial from the Pit Grave culture (no age or sex obtainable) due to the orientation of the body, lack of grave good materials and the evidence for organic bedding and grave pit covering. This would suggest a

Bronze Age period burial with a relative date of approximately 1900-1800 BC.

The other five burials can be attributed to the second mound phase construction. The original site report characterised these as all being of the Sauro-Sarmatian type. However, only one of these burials (Burial 3) contained artefacts that would allow for a date through typological comparison. This burial contained the remains of two individuals with an age and sex determined to be that of an adult male 40-50 years of age and a child of 7-12 years of age. The associated artefacts point to a relative date of the 3rd-4th centuries BC for this burial as well as providing evidence of imported articles (e.g. flask type pottery, Fig. 8). The other four burials within the mound may be generally characterised as Sauro-Sarmatian based upon the corpse orientation and grave pit construction (e.g. Fig. 6). However, relative dating is impossible without associated artefacts for typological comparison or the availability of radiocarbon dates.

Chernaya II

The Chernaya II mortuary complex was composed of two kurgan mound structures representing a total of fourteen burials. Kurgan I contained a series of twelve burials, which can be seen as quite complex in nature, and were comprised of five males, two females, one child and four undetermined individuals. Unfortunately, space constraints will not allow a full detailed discussion of the burials associated with this kurgan but it can be stated that there is a broad range of variability associated with the burial sequences within this structure as well as the associative grave good articles.

Chronologically, these burials reflect relative dates concurrent with the Sauro-Sarmatian period, with a range of dates between the 5th-late 2nd centuries BC. The range of grave articles reflect pottery (e.g. hand moulded and imported wheel-turned types, Figs. 7 and 9), weaponry (e.g. swords, daggers, and bronze arrowheads, Fig. 10) and faunal remains (e.g. sheep/goat, and horse). The original site report (Koryakova 1979) characterised this burial structure as that of a 'warrior burial site' due to the frequency of weaponry grave article inclusions and the high number of male burials (Figs. 4 and 5). However, it is interesting to note that where weaponry objects are deposited there appears to be little uniformity in their representation. One can see that there is a patterned choice being utilised by the living in that the weaponry pieces are usually swords, daggers or arrowheads, however, the exact number of these items as well as the specific placement or deposition within the burial chamber seems to vary considerably. In addition, the limitation to just these specific objects, or indeed the lack of any grave goods, may hint at more important processes (e.g. changing burial patterns) rather than simply status or rank reflection as has been a common interpretation in many past efforts. Certainly though, one should keep in mind the forces of time and nature and the taphonomic processes at work within these sites, as we are clearly left with only those preserved materials which are able to stand the test of time. We have, therefore, lost a great deal of information in the form of the organic materials

that would have represented a significant component within the selection of grave goods assemblages.

Kurgan II contained evidence of two inhumation burials with one skeleton found in an articulated state and the other burial reflecting a disarticulated individual. The original site report postulated that this was a Bronze Age period Andronovo-type burial (approximately 1500–1000 BC), based upon the recovered pottery sherds associated with the burial chamber. In addition, however, there was evidence found for early Sauro-Sarmatian activity on the site as the top of a bone comb was found with zoomorphic figures. The typology for this comb provides a relative date to the 3rd–2nd centuries BC (Moshkova 1963: table 26). Concerning this mortuary structure, the original site report postulated that the primary phase of the Kurgan had been constructed during the Bronze Age by the Andronovo Culture and had been subsequently utilised later for burial activity by Sarmatian groups. However, the latter burials that were associated with the Iron Age period had suffered through environmental exposure as well as modern agricultural use of the land.

Discussion

The previous descriptions have attempted to provide a broad characterisation of the materials and patterns associated with the kurgans and burials of the Kardaielova II and Chernaya II mortuary complexes. However, in trying to determine the nature of the ritual practices, and the variability expressed within the material cultural evidence, one can see that it is not possible to glean all the necessary information from simply the material remains found. One must provide a structured framework and an analytical perspective for such an approach. As discussed earlier, there are specific elements of many types of rituality, including burial practices, which may be seen to lie within the tripartite structure provided by Van Gennep's *rites of passage* (1960) analytical framework. Particularly pertinent to the interpretation of burial rituality, and its inherent complexity and variability, is the concept of the *liminal* process. Within this important process important 'structured' relationships may be carried out which have significant implications upon the way the burial is represented in a material form for archaeologists to interpret.

In addition, it is imperative to acknowledge the substantial dynamics that are part of the burial process. Rather than seeing the burial evidence as simply a direct reflection of the deceased's status and rank within the previous life, there are a host of possible alternatives which can be seen to play a part in the process of the construction of the burial structure, the preparation of the body and the inclusion/non-inclusion of artefacts with the corpse. Thus, as one approaches the burial evidence, it is necessary to consider that the material remains of the burial may indeed represent not only the rank and status of the interred individual, but also a multitude of possible characterisations of the roles which this individual may have assumed. Additionally, one should be aware of the possible powerful resource that not only the corpse but the site of the burial itself (i.e. the kurgan) may have provided the *living* members of the

community. This latter issue clearly speaks to the reuse of the kurgan sites through time as well as for multi-cultural use of the sites.

One must also bear in mind that the complex nature of burial rituality does not occur within a socio-cultural vacuum, and that important societal elements such as wealth, power and ideology can all be reflected within the patterns of variability associated with mortuary practices. In regards to the burials discussed within this paper, it is obvious that the nomadic subsistence cycle is also of paramount importance to understanding how these past mobile pastoralists moved and interacted within the landscape around them. This relationship is certainly also related to the overall cosmology or religious practices which these early groups may have incorporated within their rituals of burial. Within these significant cognitive constructs one must consider how material culture played an active role in the negotiation of socio-cultural relationships and thus came to be reflected within the burial sequences. It is therefore, of utmost importance that one attempts to engage in contextual studies which incorporate all of the materials (e.g. skeletal evidence, faunal remains, pottery, weaponry, etc.) associated with burial patterns as well as seeking to develop an awareness for the relationship between burials within similar kurgans, mortuary sites and across the landscape

Conclusion

To briefly summarise, the points outlined and developed within this paper illustrate the need to construct an extended approach to the understanding of burial variability and its relationship to past societal reconstruction. However, it must be said that this approach certainly does not act as a template for the analysis of a society; instead, it is simply a guideline for the construction of an analytical framework which must address an awareness for the specific criteria relevant within each cultural application. Thus, with these ideas in mind, it is imperative that a more holistically structured theoretical framework for the interpretation of burial variability be devised, one which allows for a less rigid characterisation of status and role for individuals in the past and, in turn, offers a stronger contextual approach to burial interpretation. One which clearly acknowledges the role of the living and their agency within the ritual process as well as the constructs of age and gender/sex of the deceased.

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Endnotes

1. Saxe's work was influenced by Goodenough's (1965) ideas concerning anthropological *role theory* (see Tainter 1978 for a good discussion of this).
2. This relates primarily to Saxe's *Hypothesis 8*.
3. Goldstein's approach was based upon a cross-cultural survey of 30 societies.
4. The author was granted permission by L. N. Koryakova and the Russian Academy of Science to work with the unpublished site reports and material artefacts from these sites for his MA dissertation research during 1998–1999.

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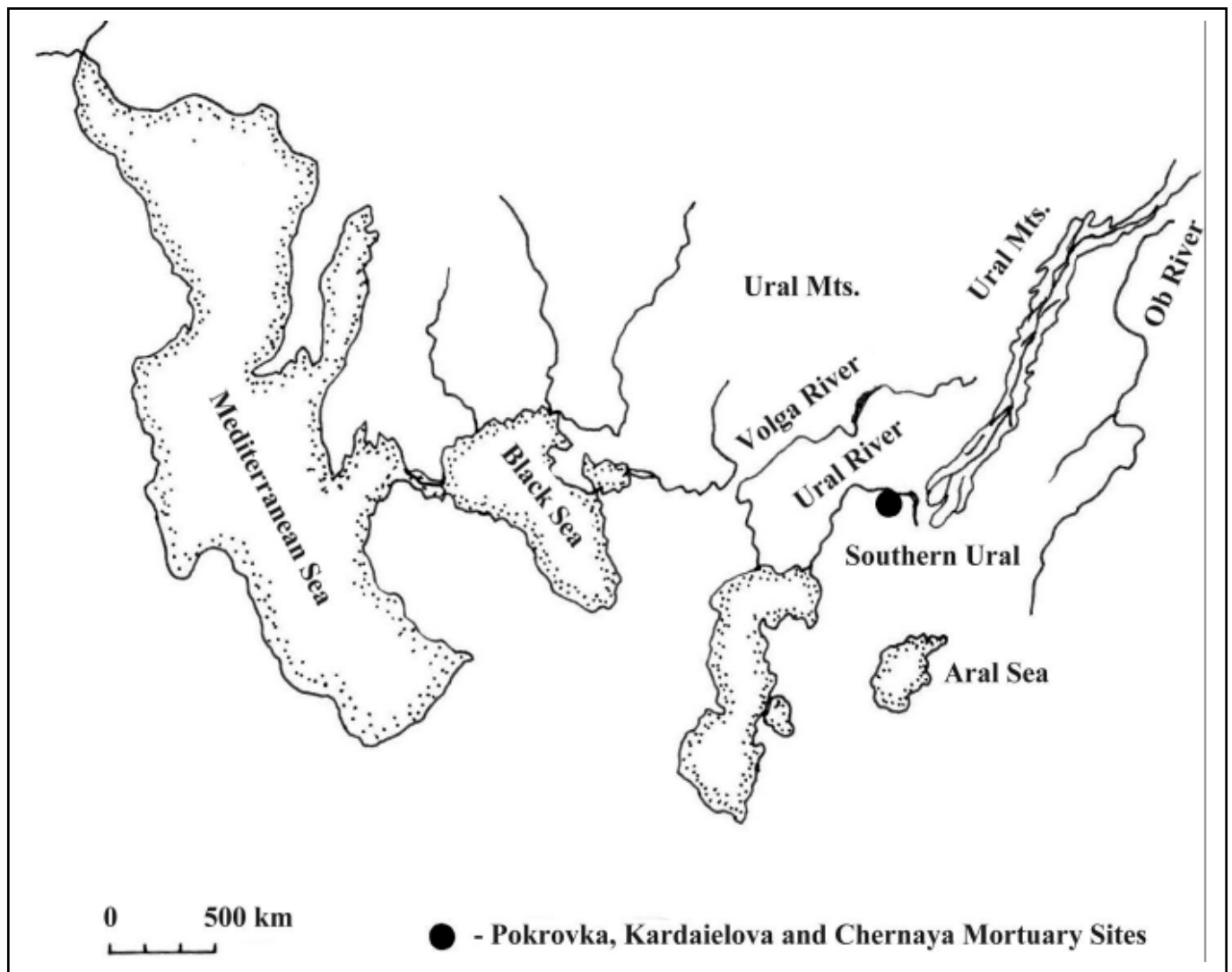


Figure 1. Map of Eurasia with location of mortuary sites discussed within text.

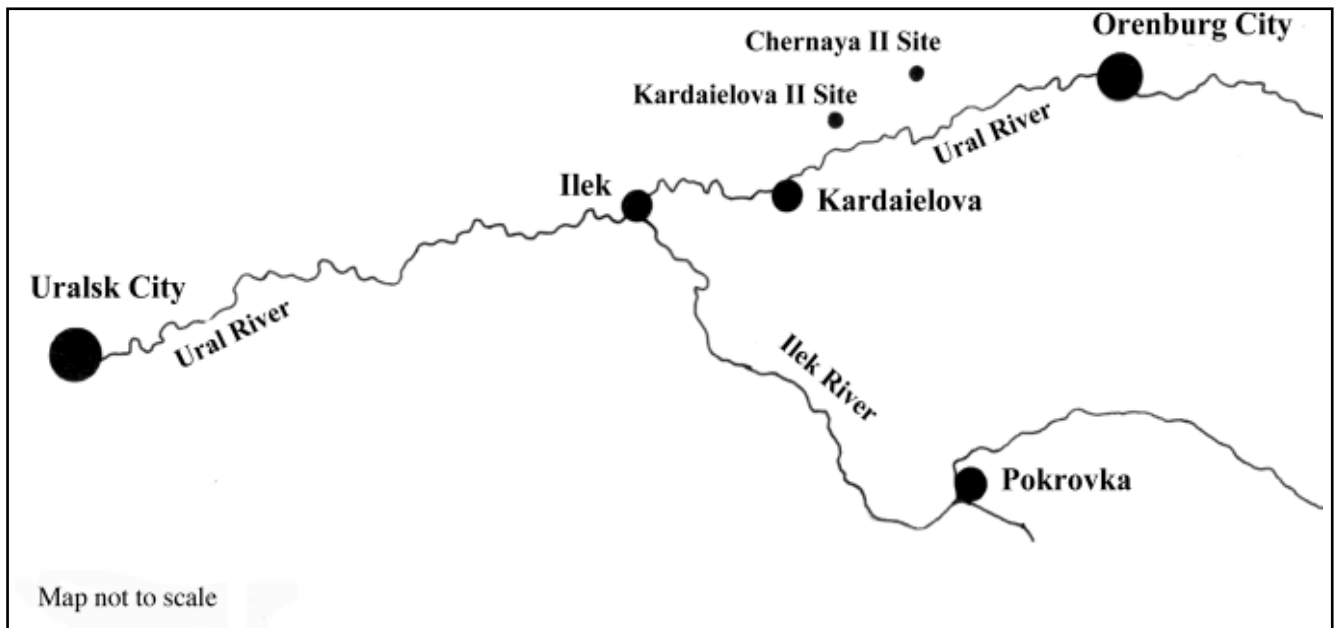


Figure 2. Map of Southern Ural region with mortuary site orientation.

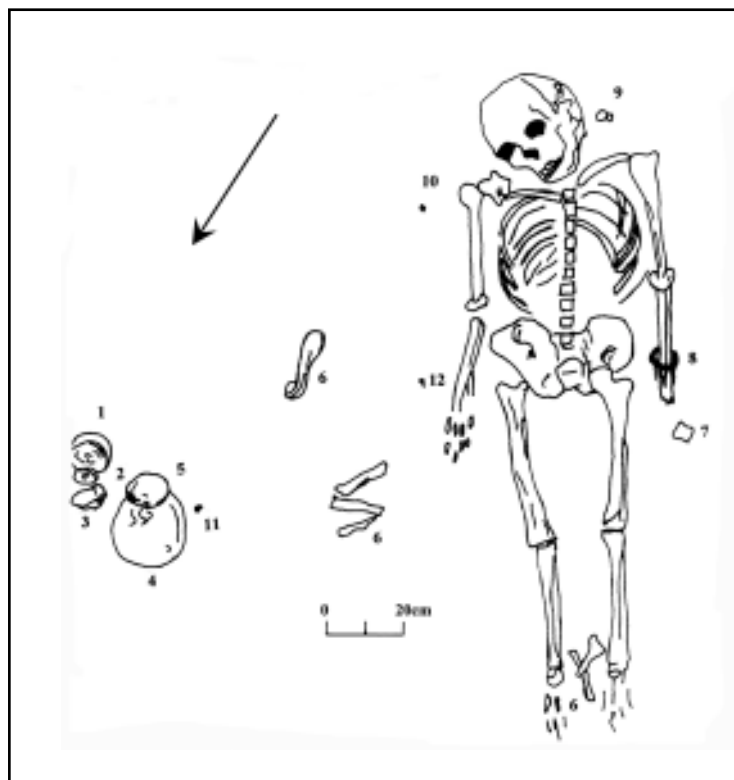


Figure 3. Plan of Sauro-Sarmatian female burial from the Kardaielova II site, Kurgan II, Burial 1, with associated grave goods: 1 - bronze mirror; 2 - spindlewhorl; 3 - shell with chalk residue; 4 - hand molded pottery; 5 - fragmented iron knife (behind pot); 6 - sheep/goat bones; 7 - chalk fragments; 8 - bronze bracelet; 9 - small yellow stone; 10 - bronze object fragment, 11 - paste type bead; 12 - small bronze buckle. * Traces of chalk residue found around entire skeleton. (after Koryakova 1978)

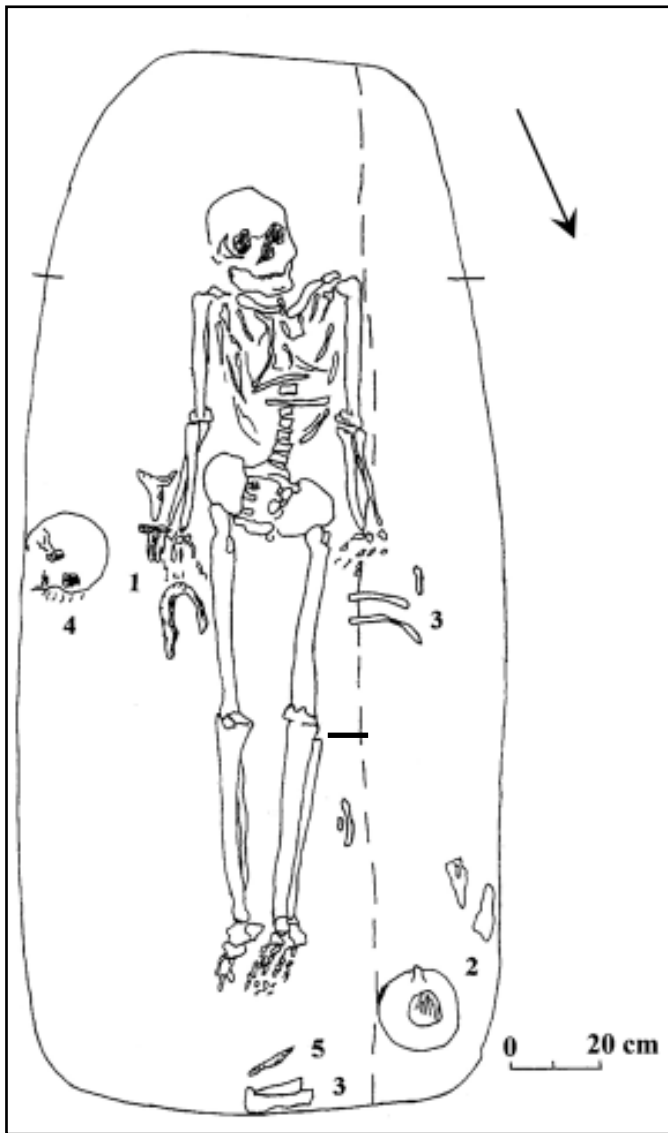


Figure 4. Plan of Sauro-Sarmatian male burial from the Chernaya II cemetery site, Kurgan I, Burial 9b. Associated grave goods are: 1 - iron sword (bent and broken); 2 - pottery vessel; 3- faunal remains (sheep/goat – elements not detailed); 4 - additional human crania; and 5 - iron knife. (after Koryakova 1978)

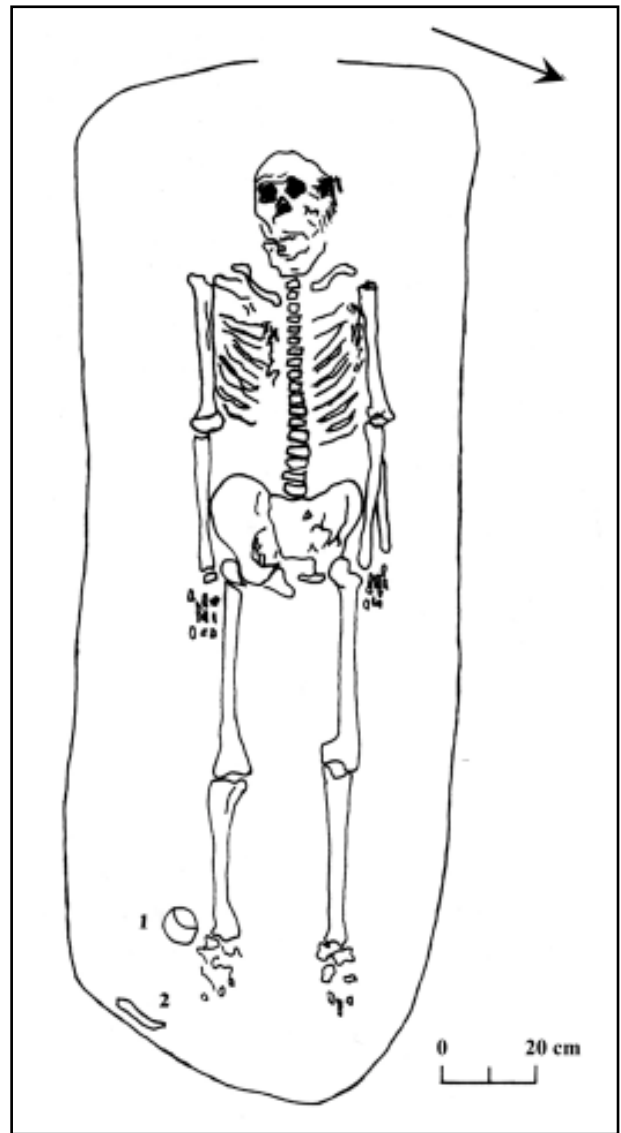


Figure 5. Plan of Sauro-Sarmatian male burial from the Chernaya II cemetery site, Kurgan I, Burial 4. Associated artifacts include: 1 - round polished stone with center hole (possible mace head); and 2 - large animal bone (taxon and element not detailed). (re-drawn from Koryakova 1978)



Figure 7. Wheel turned pottery vessel from the Chernaya II Cemetery site, Kurgan I, Burial 9. (photo L. Koryakova).

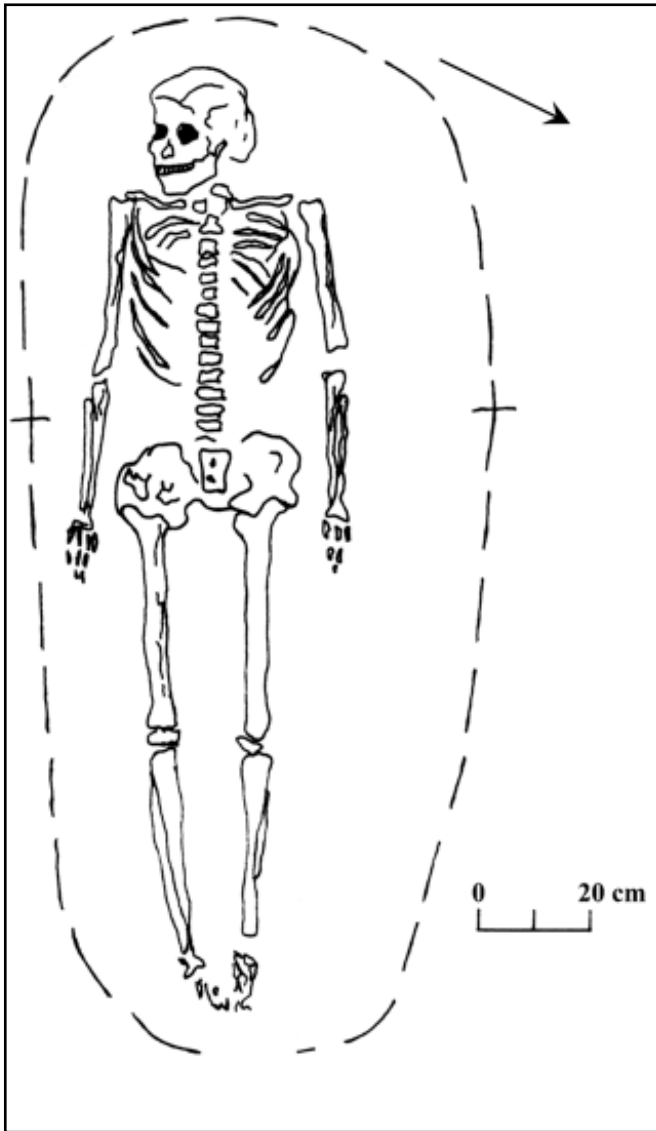


Figure 6. Plan of Sauro-Sarmatian male burial from the Kardaielova II Cemetery site, Kurgan III, Burial 5. No associated grave good articles were uncovered within the burial. (After Koryakova 1978)



Figure 8. Wheel turned (flask-type) pottery vessel from the Kardaielova II Cemetery site, Kurgan III, Burial 3. (photo L. Koryakova)



Figure 9. Hand molded pottery vessel from the Kardaielova II, Cemetery site, Kurgan II, from mound structure. (Photo L. Koryakova)

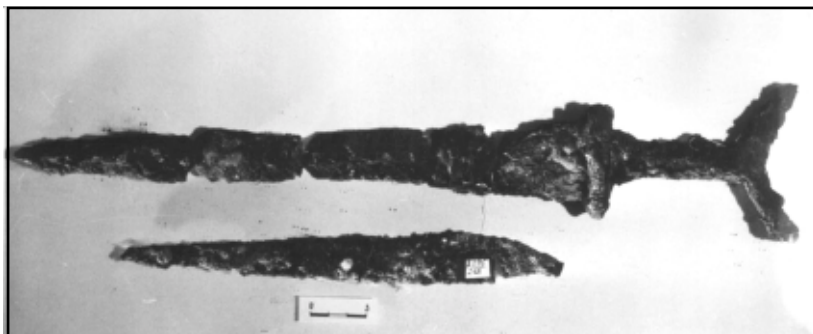


Figure 10. Weaponry from the Chernaya II Cemetery site, Kurgan I, Burial 9: sword and dagger. (photo L. Koryakova)