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978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

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## SOCIAL COMPLEXITY IN PREHISTORIC EURASIA MONUMENTS, METALS, AND MOBILITY

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*Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia* challenges current interpretations of the emergence, development, and decline of social complexity in the steppe region of China and the former Soviet Union. Through a thematic investigation of archaeological patterns ranging from monument construction and use to the production and consumption of metals and the nature of mobility among societies, the essays in this volume provide the most up-to-date thinking on social and cultural change in prehistoric Eurasia. Collectively, they challenge broader theoretical trends in Anglo-American archaeology, which have traditionally favored comparative studies of sedentary agricultural societies over mobile pastoralist or agro-pastoralist communities. By highlighting the potential and limitations of comparative studies of social complexity, this volume sets the agenda for future studies of this region of the world. It emphasizes how the unique nature of early steppe societies can contribute to more comprehensive interpretations of social trajectories in world prehistory.

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IN  
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MONUMENTS, METALS, AND MOBILITY



EDITED BY

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>	page ix
<i>Foreword: From Myth to Method: Advances in the Archaeology of the Eurasian Steppe</i>	
Colin Renfrew	xv
CHAPTER 1 <i>Introduction: Reconsidering Steppe Social Complexity within World Prehistory</i>	
Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff	i

PART ONE FRAMING COMPLEXITY

CHAPTER 2 <i>Introduction</i>	
Ludmila Koryakova	ii
CHAPTER 3 <i>Differentiated Landscapes and Non-uniform Complexity among Bronze Age Societies of the Eurasian Steppe</i>	
Michael D. Frachetti	19
CHAPTER 4 <i>The Sintashta Genesis: The Roles of Climate Change, Warfare, and Long-Distance Trade</i>	
David W. Anthony	47
CHAPTER 5 <i>Settlements and Cemeteries of the Bronze Age of the Urals: The Potential for Reconstructing Early Social Dynamics</i>	
Andrei V. Epimakhov	74
CHAPTER 6 <i>The Maikop Singularity: The Unequal Accumulation of Wealth on the Bronze Age Eurasian Steppe?</i>	
Philip L. Kohl	91

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility  
Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

vi | CONTENTS

PART TWO MINING, METALLURGY, AND TRADE

CHAPTER 7 <i>Introduction</i> Katheryn M. Linduff	107
CHAPTER 8 <i>Formation of the Eurasian Steppe Belt Cultures: Viewed through the Lens of Archaeometallurgy and Radiocarbon Dating</i> Evgenii N. Chernykh	115
CHAPTER 9 <i>Late Prehistoric Mining, Metallurgy, and Social Organization in North Central Eurasia</i> Bryan K. Hanks	146
CHAPTER 10 <i>The Bronze-Using Cultures in the Northern Frontier of Ancient China and the Metallurgies of Ancient Dian Area in Yunnan Province</i> Rubin Han and Xiaocen Li	168
CHAPTER 11 <i>Production and Social Complexity: Bronze Age Metalworking in the Middle Volga</i> David L. Peterson	187
CHAPTER 12 <i>Early Metallurgy and Socio-Cultural Complexity: Archaeological Discoveries in Northwest China</i> Jianjun Mei	215

PART THREE FRONTIERS AND BORDER DYNAMICS

CHAPTER 13 <i>Introduction</i> Thomas Barfield	235
CHAPTER 14 <i>Violence on the Frontiers? Sources of Power and Socio-Political Change at the Easternmost Parts of the Eurasian Steppe during the Late Second and Early First Millennia BCE</i> Gideon Shelach	241
CHAPTER 15 <i>First-Millennium BCE Beifang Artifacts as Historical Documents</i> Emma C. Bunker	272

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility  
Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

Contents | vii

CHAPTER 16 <i>Blurring the Boundaries: Foragers and Pastoralists in the Volga-Urals Region</i>	
Laura M. S. Popova	296
PART FOUR SOCIAL POWER, MONUMENTALITY, AND MOBILITY	
CHAPTER 17 <i>Introduction</i>	
Francis Allard	323
CHAPTER 18 <i>Re-writing Monumental Landscapes as Inner Asian Political Process</i>	
William Honeychurch, Joshua Wright, and Chunag Amartuvshin	330
CHAPTER 19 <i>Socially Integrative Facilities and the Emergence of Societal Complexity on the Mongolian Steppe</i>	
Jean-Luc Houle	358
CHAPTER 20 <i>Pre-Scythian Ceremonialism, Deer Stone Art, and Cultural Intensification in Northern Mongolia</i>	
William W. Fitzhugh	378
<i>Index</i>	413

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## X | CONTRIBUTORS

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Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Contributors* | xi

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978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xii | CONTRIBUTORS

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Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Contributors* | xiii

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## FOREWORD

## From Myth to Method

### *Advances in the Archaeology of the Eurasian Steppe*

COLIN RENFREW

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IN RECENT years, the archaeology of the Eurasian steppe has seen some remarkable advances. Up to a couple of decades ago, it seemed that little progress was being made, despite important archaeological discoveries in a number of relevant countries. The same rather simple models, based on an undifferentiated view of mobile steppe pastoralism and the notion of a short yet significant episode in which the domestication of the horse was achieved, had held sway since the early twentieth century. The valid contrasts emphasized in *The Steppe and the Sown* by Peake and Fleure (1928) led in the early work of Gordon Childe (1926) to a simplistic view of mounted nomad pastoralists, a view that has survived into recent times, although it was later reassessed by Childe himself (1950).

Today the picture is completely transformed, as the present volume emphasizes. In particular, recent discoveries have now allowed a clear differentiation to be established between the developments of the Bronze and Iron Ages in the steppes, in social and economic terms as much as in metallurgy. The development toward a pastoralist economy in the earlier Bronze Age, as well exemplified by the Sintashta culture of western Siberia with its chariot burials (Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007: 66–80; Parzinger 2006: 251–259, 338–342), was not accompanied by any conspicuous evidence of horse riding for military purposes, although horses are documented for drawing chariots as early as 2000 BCE and were presumably ridden earlier than this for the purposes of herding (see Renfrew 1998). It was not until the Iron Age, in the first millennium BCE, that Eurasian nomad pastoralism developed as a militarily significant enterprise with a complex, hierarchical, and ramified social

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Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xvi | COLIN RENFREW

structure utilizing effective military power based upon the deployment of mounted warriors (Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007: 209–220; Parzinger 2006, 679–692). This was the period of the first great kurgans, such as at Arzhan in the Tuva area (Parzinger 2006: 606–619; Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007: 327), which may be regarded as royal burials of a nomadic elite, anticipating by several centuries the Scythians as they appear in the writings of Herodotus.

Steppe archaeology is now one of the most dynamic fields in the whole ambit of prehistoric studies, as is reflected in the publications of some earlier conferences (e.g., Mair 1988; Levine et al. 1999; Boyle et al. 2002; Levine et al. 2003) and documented in the recent magisterial survey by Parzinger (2006). The reasons for this upsurge in interest and in productive research are several, and they are well exemplified here.

In the first place, the vast terrain of central Eurasia has opened up to scholarship. International meetings are being held within the area, at sites such as Arkaim or Gonur Tepe, as much as in Beijing or Pittsburgh. This new openness has facilitated publication in the West by major scholars who did not earlier enjoy a wide readership there (e.g., Chernykh 1992; Mei 2000) and the participation in the field of a whole new generation of younger workers, many of whom are represented in this volume.

Second, it is at last possible to compare and contrast the various cultures, across a terrain that reaches almost to the Pacific Ocean in the east to lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea in the west, with the benefit of a secure chronological framework. Radiocarbon dates, increasingly accompanied by tree-ring dates in some cases, are beginning, for the first time, to produce a coherent chronology (see Hanks et al. 2007). Already there have been some shocks. The relatively early date of the Sintashta culture, associated with the first use of the chariot, is now well documented. And at the conference whose papers are presented here, the early dates for the Maikop burial, presented by Chernykh, and discussed also by Kohl, offer not so much a refinement as a disruption of most earlier assumptions.

Through these new projects, new areas of research are opening up. Prominent among these is the development of trade. New research on the sources and early use of tin has offered this commodity as one salient vector for the rapid development of bronze metallurgy in the later Bronze Age. There, as in other areas of steppe archaeology, the work of colleagues from the German Archaeological Institute, often in collaboration with scholars from the steppe lands or neighboring countries, has been particularly important. Moreover, the ecology of the exploitation

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Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword* | xvii

of the steppe lands is now the subject for sustained research. The basis for the early use of the area, before the development of the full system of mobile pastoralism seen during the Iron Age, is under investigation. And the much-debated question of the domestication of the horse is seen in a new light, especially when careful distinction is made between horses for food, to facilitate herding, for pulling chariots, and to support armed warriors. Molecular genetic research, applied to plant and animal species, is proving as relevant here as when applied to living human populations.

These approaches and the application of new models for change and of new explanatory frameworks have led to an exciting quickening in the pace of research, as the chapters in this volume document. A number of broad questions can now be posed rather more clearly. It is evident that the mounted warriors of the great chiefdoms of the Iron Age, some of them designated by classical writers as Cimmerians and Scythians, relied upon a social order and an economic system that were remarkably successful. They seem to have emerged in the first millennium BCE but were based on earlier antecedents. How can we better define the social and economic systems that sustained these prosperous mobile communities?

The communities of the Bronze Age of the second millennium BCE that preceded these clearly were themselves innovators, and it was during this time that the first great trading networks seem to have been established. We see the settlement archaeology of some of these communities in sites like Sintashta and Arkaim, in the so-called country of towns. But can we define more precisely the economies and societies at this time, including those of the Andronovo culture? The horse is documented as used for pulling chariots already at the beginning of the second millennium. But can we establish more clearly when horse riding became significant for military purposes? Yet the initial domestication of the steppes must have begun before this time. The evidence for plant and animal domesticates is not yet very abundant before 2000 BCE, yet by then some of the important transitions must have been occurring.

Issues need to be defined more clearly before we can hope to understand by what means, for instance, the horse-drawn chariot reached China. Early steppe metallurgy too needs further study, if we are to establish definitively whether the surprisingly late use in China of copper and of bronze was a technology learned from the West. Perhaps we are close to seeing answers to some of these questions.

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978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii | COLIN RENFREW

The benefits to our understanding of world prehistory will then be immense. From a broad perspective, the degree and nature of the influence and which way the arrows of transmission point still have to be established conclusively on the basis of secure data. That goal is now within reach. There are also vast issues in linguistic prehistory. What was the role of the steppe communities in the dissemination of the languages of the Indo-European family? That vexed question has not yet been satisfactorily answered (see Anthony 2007), and some recent initiatives offer results that are disconcertingly inconclusive (Lamberg-Karlovsky 2002). In particular, the problem of how the Indo-Iranian languages (or their precursor) reached South Asia remains to be resolved. In a similar vein, we need to understand better the archaeological record to document the Mongol invasions and to explain the present-day distribution of languages in the area.

Such linguistic issues, however, simply serve to emphasize the critical role of the Eurasian steppe lands in world prehistory. At times, these vast tracts of land have served to separate two very active and sometimes independent heartlands of cultural activity: western Asia (with the eastern Mediterranean) to the west and China to the east. At other times, particularly with the more effective use of the horse and of the camel, they have formed an important zone connecting these two great centers (or congeries of centers) of domestication and later of civilization. The proper understanding of these changing interactions is now one of the major tasks that prehistoric archaeology has to address, and the essays here take some important steps in that direction. A few decades ago, the question of long-distance interactions across the Pacific Ocean was a puzzling and a much-disputed one. Today it seems largely resolved, and the complex question of trans-Eurasian interactions now seems more pressing. Significant interpretive problems remain, however, and continue to be controversial, as noted by Philip Kohl (2007: 133) in his recent thoughtful study of Bronze Age Eurasia:

Simplifying [two] starkly opposed interpretive models, one can say that the first group [of scholars] sees the basic direction of movements or cultural impulses even before the beginnings of the Bronze Age as proceeding east to west, whereas the latter group reverses the arrows and essentially interprets developments on the Pontic steppes and further east as ultimately dependent on innovations that were associated with the sedentary agricultural societies first of southeastern Europe, including the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, and the mixed agricultural/transhumant societies of the Caucasus.



Cambridge University Press

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Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Foreword | xix

That expresses the dilemma, perhaps in its simplest form. It is further complicated by the additional role that the steppe lands may have played through their interactions with the Indian sub-continent, mediated by the arid yet potentially fertile lands that lie between, such as Turkmenistan and Serindia (including Xinjiang Province). These interactions varied dramatically with the changing nature of the societies in those different regions and with their assessment of the benefits of trade, travel, and conquest in the context of developing transport mechanisms and of the fluctuating range of commodities traded, not least metals and silk.

This timely volume addresses some of these important topics. It will make a significant contribution to the understanding of the prehistory and the cultures of the steppe lands and their neighbors.

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51712-6 - Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility

Edited by Bryan K. Hanks and Katheryn M. Linduff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xx | COLIN RENFREW

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