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978-1-107-01652-1 - The Archaeology of Power and Politics in Eurasia: Regimes and Revolutions

Edited by Charles W. Hartley, G. Bike Yazıcıoğlu and Adam T. Smith

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# INTRODUCTION: REGIMES, REVOLUTIONS, AND THE MATERIALITY OF POWER IN EURASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

*Charles W. Hartley, G. Bike Yazıcıoğlu, and  
Adam T. Smith*

Few other parts of the world have experienced the kind of intense, sustained political upheaval that has convulsed the vast continent of Eurasia over the last hundred years. While the 1917 October Revolution and the 1991 collapse of the USSR effectively bookend what Eric Hobsbawm (1994) has referred to as “the short 20th century,” these are only the most prominent revolutionary moments in an era of colliding regimes that reshaped social life from the most intimate confines of the home to the global circuits of the geopolitical order. So it is quite peculiar that the archaeology of Eurasia has been so deaf to the forces transforming the continent during the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Only rarely has the discipline attended to the making and remaking of political authority in the region as a determinative force in the wide-scale sociocultural transformations that have shaped the continent over the *longue durée*. Instead, traditions of regional scholarship have been far more inclined to seek explanations for past culture change in long-term processes such as population movements driven by subsistence needs or environmental shifts than they have in conflicting ideologies or in the rivalries of implacably opposed regimes.

There are, of course, very good reasons for this state of affairs since large-scale migrations and the unique ecologies of steppe, desert, and mountain have indeed, at times, placed considerable constraints on settlement choices, material resources, and political ambitions (cf. Scott 1998). However, in pushing politics so far from our understanding of social life in Bronze Age,

Iron Age, and medieval Eurasia, the prehistory and early history of the continent seem to have been shaped by an array of forces entirely distinct from the ones that we have seen unfold during the past century. This kind of historical dissonance might not seem particularly worrisome at first glance. Revolutions are, after all, committed to radical breaks with the past and so have undoubtedly unleashed critical new dynamics unknown in earlier eras. However, there are reasons to suspect that just as revolutions ultimately recuperate an account of their forebears, archaeologists have been too hasty in evacuating the politics of regimes and revolutions from their understanding of Eurasia's past even as the political tends to swamp our sense of its present.

Indeed, just as archaeological explanations have largely eschewed accounts of the operation of political forces in the past, examinations of contemporary politics have suffered from the lack of a critical archaeological voice even as the (pre)history of Eurasia came increasingly center stage in claims to authority across the continent (see chapters by Buchli, Kohl, Linduff and Yang, Shnirelman, and Smith, this volume). This is a key point, as it raises the question of exactly what role archaeology can play in developing a wider understanding not only of Eurasia's past but of its present as well. During the Soviet era, the history of material culture was critical to that regime's historical outlook. But what does archaeology mean in our new era, when the continent is parceled into a patchwork of regimes from the liberal to the despotic? The archaeological past plays a critical role in Eurasian political life today, but it remains largely untheorized as a critical element of the postsocialist condition (although see Khatchadourian 2008a; Kohl and Tsetskhladze 1995; Shnirelman 1995, 2001; Smith 2004).

### WHAT REGIME? WHOSE REVOLUTION?

In a vernacular sense, the terms *regime* and *revolution* are typically taken to be oppositional. Regimes are static, entrenched apparatuses of governance that are often associated with coercion, corruption, or both. In contrast, revolutions are dynamic, transformative assaults on the political body that not only depose a regime but also reconstitute the very terms of civil association. But these senses of the terms are arguably too dramatically polarized, too taken with moments of extreme political calcification and upheaval to capture the way the two work in tandem as both real and imagined political forces to shape everyday political life. Hence, the regime is better understood as that set of critical institutions that mediate ties between government and the public sphere. In this regard, regime includes rather obvious analytical locations – courts, political parties, etc. – as well as the rhetorics and

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aesthetics that legitimate the reproduction of the existing order. Revolution challenges the regime, opening it up to questioning, delegitimization, and the possibility of alternative political realities. Revolutionary acts are thus not limited to singular moments of intense – and typically quite brief – political upheaval (this sense of the term may be useful for historians but does not serve archaeology well). Instead, revolution lies in the activities of countervailing forces that resist the aspirations of regimes, and thus it can be traced not only in institutional settings – popular assemblies, the media that shapes public opinion, etc. – but also in the wider aesthetic domain of political culture.

This volume opens a conversation on the role of regimes and revolutions across Eurasia from prehistory to the present by bringing together archaeological investigations focused on case studies drawn from the Bronze Age to today. The first, most obvious, challenge posed by such an expansive effort is of course spatial. The enormity of the continent dwarfs most other canonical archaeological regions, and the extraordinary environmental, linguistic, cultural, religious, social, and political diversity strains efforts to justify treating the region as a coherent object of study. For our purposes here, Eurasia is defined broadly as extending from Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, and the Caucasus in the west to the Mongolian steppe, China, and the Korean Peninsula in the east. The vagueness of this definition is intentional as we are less concerned with delimiting the boundaries of the continent than in promoting an inclusive understanding of the region that resists balkanization into small insular research areas. Thus, although the archaeological cases examined in this volume are separated by sizeable distances, much more is achieved by setting them in conversation with one another than by segmenting them into discrete zones. This is not to say that there are not important local traditions that shape archaeological priorities in smaller regions such as the Caucasus, Central Asia, or the Russian steppe. Yet a central conceit of this and other recent works (e.g., Anthony 2007; Hanks and Linduff 2009; Kohl 2007b; Kuz'mina 2008) is that a broad, integrated archaeology of Eurasia is much more than the sum of its parts.

The second challenge posed by an archaeology of Eurasian political life is temporal. The papers in this volume range widely over time in their concerns, from the Bronze Age to the modern day. Here too, far more analytical insight is gained by bringing these cases into conversation than is achieved by walling them off from one another. The archaeology of Eurasia does not lack for extended accounts of either individual periods or specific regions (the bibliography for this volume provides an excellent overview of this vast literature); what the field is lacking, however, is a sustained anthropological conversation centered on a single theme that draws the continent together

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as an object of study over the *longue durée*. That is precisely what this book seeks to accomplish by forwarding political life in Eurasia as the central object of inquiry.

Our third challenge is intellectual in that the archaeology of Eurasia has become an object of study for an array of distinct academic traditions, each with its own research methods, analytical priorities, and interpretive procedures. The task of a volume such as this is not to force the authors to conform to one tradition, but rather to bring Eurasian archaeology's delightful heterodoxy into the open by putting these traditions into conversation with one another. In this volume, the most conspicuous traditions at play are those of China, the former Soviet Union, and the Anglophonic West. Yet what is most compelling about these traditions, when juxtaposed, is the remarkable commonalities that unite their understandings of both archaeology as a disciplinary practice and political life as an object of scholarly concern. What this suggests is not only the possibility of in-depth conversations but also the productive possibilities of truly collaborative research.

The history of archaeological research across Eurasia has recently gained considerable attention as a number of studies have sought to explore the intellectual formation of the region's unique tradition of engagement with material culture. The two largest indigenous traditions of archaeological research in the region – (post-)Soviet and Chinese – are also two of the most populous and institutionally extensive communities of archaeologists in the world. Historiographic reflection on the emergence of Russian imperial and Soviet archaeology emerged initially in the USSR itself where the openings for historical reflection engendered by *glasnost*' created space for new dialogues among archaeologists on the past achievements and future directions of the field (e.g., Bulkin et al. 1982; Gening 1982). The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the door to substantive collaborations with international teams of researchers even as it presented extraordinary economic and political challenges to the institutions of archaeological investigation within the now independent republics of the former USSR. The expansion and maturation of international collaborations across the former Soviet space encouraged efforts by Western scholars to detail the historical formation of Eurasian archaeology since the eighteenth century and illuminate its theoretical commitments (e.g., Khatchadourian 2008a; Kohl 1993; Kohl and Tsetschladze 1995; Lindsay and Smith 2006; Smith 2005; Tolz 2005; Trigger 1989; Tunkina 2003). At the same time, archaeologists within the newly independent republics began an ongoing process of reevaluating dominant theoretical models and the contribution of Eurasian archaeological research to the global scholarly community (e.g., Dolukhanov 1993, 1995; Klejn 1993; Shnirelman 1995, 2001).

Archaeology in China has followed a related, yet clearly distinct, intellectual trajectory. Beginning as early as the Song dynasty of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Chinese traditions emphasized the “doubting of history.” What was being tested at this early date was the veracity of the historical record, in particular the chronicles of the early kingdoms and dynasties (Falkenhausen 1993). With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, signaling the end of imperial China, new possibilities for investigating the past emerged. Although sociopolitically turbulent, this period saw the first substantial collaboration with foreign archaeologists and marked the beginning of Chinese archaeology in its modern form. This trend was somewhat stymied by the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, which saw not only the “closing” of China to Western scholars but also a concerted effort to demonstrate the veracity of historical materialism (Falkenhausen 1993). The introduction of reforms during the early 1980s renewed collaborative archaeological investigations between Chinese and Western scholars even as growing nationalist and regionalist sentiments crept into interpretations of the archaeological record (Falkenhausen 1993, 1995; Liu 2004; Shaughnessy and Loewe 1999). Nevertheless, the maturation of collaborative research continues apace in Chinese archaeology. An archaeological tradition that was originally founded as a means to simply test the historical record has become a discipline dedicated to illuminating the social and political intricacies of the past (e.g., Falkenhausen and Li 2006, 2008; Linduff et al. 2002–2004; Liu 2004; Liu et al. 2002–2004; Underhill et al. 2002, 2008). What is of particular interest in the expanding corpus of both regional and continental histories of Eurasian archaeology is the central role that modern politics is accorded in shaping both theory and practice, whether in the form of direct state intervention or the more indirect operation of hegemonic political cultures. This lies in stark contrast to the studied aversion to detailing the operation of the political in most archaeological accounts of the more remote past.

If the archaeology of Eurasia was largely unknown beyond the region itself before 1991, just the last five years have produced a flood of synthetic volumes published in the West focused on filling the gap (e.g., Anthony 2007; Frachetti 2008; Kohl 2007b; Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007; Kuzmina 2008; Linduff and Rubinson 2008; Parzinger 2006; Peterson et al. 2006; Popova et al. 2007; Smith et al. 2009). Each of these works is unique in the historical and anthropological issues that it brings into focus. What they share, however, is the idea that historical transformations in one part of the continent necessarily implicate transformations elsewhere. The archaeology of Eurasia is thus as ambitious in its intellectual scope as the

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continent itself. It may or may not be big-scale archaeology, but it is without question big-picture archaeology.

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND POLITICAL LIFE

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Although archaeology has long maintained a steady focus on political life in the past, this has recently been directly paired with an interest in contemporary efforts to appropriate the archaeological record to serve sectional, irredentist, or nationalist ends (e.g., Blix 2009; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Marchand 1996; Meskell 1998; Smith 2004). Archaeological research has a long history of appropriation to the interests of political authority; however, the public face of archaeology has never been such hotly contested ground in the production and legitimation of distinct regimes of authority as it is today in Eurasia. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the archaeological past has become accessible to a wider, and a more varied, group of political agents, allowing the archaeological record not only to gain a more public prominence but also to become the object of widely varied claims. As a result, the archaeological record of Eurasia today is not simply a resource for building political legitimacy, but is at times the central stake in struggles within and between contemporary regimes.

Any political engagement with the past entails some kind of appropriation of the archaeological record as material evidence to legitimize an ideological claim. In this respect, it is the very physicality of archaeological remains that distinguishes them from, for example, the historical archive, conferring on the artifact a remarkable power to naturalize specific viewpoints as inherent in the world rather than as one of many possible worldviews. Whereas on the one hand this active political engagement has led to an increasing investment in archaeological research, in preservation efforts at prominent sites, and in the restructuring of local museums, on the other hand the political salience of archaeological sites has made them targets for destruction (e.g., the Buddhas of Bamyan that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, or the medieval Armenian cemetery at Djulfa dismantled by the Azerbaijani army in 2005). Thus the physicality of the archaeological record lends itself to appropriation not only by modern techniques of memorialization but also by technologies of erasure and forgetting.

While the political appropriation of relics from the past is hardly unique to Eurasia's contemporary moment, what is notably distinct is the emerging response within the domain of archaeological interpretation. Rather than retreating from political engagement toward a heavy emphasis on formalism or strict typology (as arguably happened in the USSR under the weight of Stalinist purges), there are promising signs that the discipline is instead

moving to draw the politics of things – past and present – more directly into the field's analytical repertoire. In one respect, this move is partially a response to recent theoretical directions in the Anglophonic world that emphasize the social instrumentality of objects and landscapes; however, in another respect, the current effort to understand the politics of things in Eurasia is a result of archaeologists closely attending to the role of things in the regimes and revolutions of recent decades.

What then would the archaeology of political life in Eurasia actually look like? The papers collected in this volume provide an immediate, if inevitably provisional, answer. First, there is a concern to balance examinations of elite institutions with accounts of the grassroots that supported them. While much current research focuses on the practices and institutional foundations of a political elite, there is no doubt that ideologies of rulership must have reached out to wider segments of the social world. Second, political transformations must be articulated to a wider domain of political culture. That is, new political practices do not arise spontaneously but rather in relation to a wide set of traditions and dispositions that frame the nature and legitimacy of rule. Third, political life is strongly material. Authority requires, and is arguably staked on, certain forms and distributions of things. Without them, regimes collapse and orders are remade. It must be said that the papers here do not speak with one voice on these three dimensions of political life in Eurasia. Rather, these foci emerge in the collective contributions of the works gathered here as critical points of discussion and argumentation.

The sections that make up this volume investigate the archaeology of political life in Eurasia in three dimensions. The contributions in the first section examine the representation of power, authority, and violence, exploring the rhetoric of regimes and revolutions and its reverberation within subject communities past and present. Let us clarify the central anthropological issue at stake in this section with an example from eastern Eurasia. Beginning with the earliest periods of Chinese prehistory, the founding of new regimes (traditionally called “dynasties”) has presented a prime example of a “regime-revolution” cycle (Falkenhausen 1993; Rawson 1999; Shaughnessy 1999). Indeed, the Zhou (1046–256 BC) rulers appear to have created a principle of rulership called the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian Ming*) that attempts to legitimize not only the rulers of a new regime but also the revolutionaries that are sure to follow – indeed, these revolutionaries are required for the proper maintenance of society (Creel 1970; Li 2000; Munro 2001; Shaughnessy 1997; Wang 2000; cf. Brumfiel 2001; Kertzer 1988; Van Buren 2000). Thus, on assuming power, one-time revolutionaries immediately become the sanctioned agents of Heaven, with the full force of the authority that this entails. Part 1 of this volume is centrally concerned

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with the historical and sociological complexity of relations between institutions of authority and grassroots subject communities.

The second section of the book focuses on the spatio-temporality of regimes and revolutions, exploring variability and commonalities across political landscapes. As noted earlier, space and time present significant challenges in Eurasian archaeology. To single out just one example, although the traditional Soviet ethnohistorical approach remains the dominant theoretical paradigm in the region,<sup>1</sup> there is a growing understanding of the political “significance of monuments” (Bradley 1998) to communities both past and present. This understanding in part emerges from the practical challenges of doing ethnohistorical archaeology on the Eurasian steppe, where mobile communities inevitably frustrate efforts to limit people in place. Thus the emergence of landscape approaches in archaeology (e.g., Alcock 2002; Knapp and Ashmore 1999; Smith 2003; Tilley 1994; Van Dyke 2008) that focus less on defining enduring territories and more on the spatial practices that constitute authority has much to offer archaeological research in Eurasia. The contributions in Part 2 of this volume press just this point, detailing the operation of politics on and through landscapes.

The third section of the book delves into the realm of materiality and explores the economic, technical, and symbolic aspects of everyday life: a politically conscious approach to questions about value-creation systems, wealth-distribution patterns, and technological change that have traditionally been treated as purely economic. Recent archaeological research across Eurasia has effectively demonstrated that a full understanding of political life can be grasped only by focusing inquiry on the physical instruments of authority. However, this draws the field into a dazzlingly wide-ranging inquiry that moves from detailed archaeometric accounts of production routines to macroscale descriptions of long-distance exchange to theoretically attuned discussions of the politics of consumption. Attention to the political lives of things does, however, provide a much-needed caution to the approaches to Eurasia’s past outlined here. Although the papers in Part 3 are most directly attentive to the operation of political forces in transforming past and present societies across Eurasia, they do not claim that politics is the only force doing so. In the simple activities of everyday craft production, to take just one example, the realm of the political is simultaneous with the social, the cultural, and the economic.

The papers gathered in this volume thus offer not only an archaeological account of the operation of authority in the formation of Eurasian communities past and present, they also provide an account of the limits of the political. As such, these papers provide a first draft, so to speak, of the analytical and interpretive tools necessary to forging an archaeology of Eurasia



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that allows regimes and revolutions to play a determinative role not only in the present, but also in the past.

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**NOTES**

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- 1 An interpretive framework akin to Western culture-history that works to chart the spatial mosaic and historical phases of discrete culture groups.

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