

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

Studia uralo-altaica 53

Redigunt

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

Papers of the 7th International Conference on the Medieval History
of the Eurasian Steppe
Nov. 9–12, 2018
Shanghai University, China

Edited by Chen Hao

Szeged, 2019

This publication was financially supported by the MTA-ELTE-SZTE Silk Road Research Group

© University of Szeged,
Department of Altaic Studies,
Department of Finno-Ugrian Philology
Printed in 2019

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Printed by: Innovariant Ltd., H-6750 Algyó, Ipartelep 4.

ISBN: 978-963-306-708-6 (printed)

ISBN: 978-963-306-714-7 (pdf)

ISSN: 0133 4239

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An Archaeology of the Nomadic Groups of the Eurasian Steppes between Europe and Asia. Traditional Viewpoint and New Research Perspectives

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Introduction

The Eurasian nomadic peoples, as is well known, include a large group of peoples of various and different ethnic origins (mostly first Iranian and then Palaeo-Turkish) and of different chronological horizons (here we focus on the period from the Bronze Age to the Early Middle Ages). They have often been described in the historical documentation of the greatest sedentary political-states or imperial formations (Rome, Byzantium, Iran, China) as invaders respectively of Europe, the Near East and China. The archaeological evidence and remaining documentation on them, nonetheless, is rather complicated to interpret and clearly attribute, especially as far as the ethno-cultural characterization of the related material culture.

There are many cases, in fact, where the material culture attributable to a group of nomadic Eurasian people presents morphological, typological and functional characteristics similar to those of another. Firstly, as can easily be imagined, this issue refers to the theoretical discussion and debate concerning the very definition of pastoral nomadism in ancient Eurasia and the difficulties in identifying its very nature and complexity. The traditional Soviet school and the neo-evolutionist interpretation regarding the early states and chiefdoms (Service 1962; Fried 1967; Claessen and Skalnik 1980) at first dominated the principal studies on the matter. Then, the role given by other schools of thought to dependency/independency factors in the birth and evolution of pastoral nomadic society (Khazanov 1978a; 1978b; 1984; Barfield 1993; Kradin 2002; 2014; Di Cosmo 2002; 2009; and Honeychurch 2010; 2013; 2014) dramatically expanded the conceptual system of reference used up to that point.

The rather strong criticism of the crucial role played by the political formations of the chiefdoms advanced by other scholars (Yoffee 2005; Pauketat 2007; Sneath 2007) further contributed to the development of the debate. Finally, conceptual alternatives to the key role of chiefdoms, the ideas of hierarchy (settlements, burials, concentration of long distance prestige grave goods in elite burials and their reflection in ideological systems) and heterarchy (standardized mode of life in architecture; absence of rank in mortuary practices, dispersal distribution of long distance prestige grave goods, universalized cosmology and religious cults)

(Crumley 1995; Kradin Bondarenko Barfield 2003 (eds.); Honeychurch, Amartuvshin 2006; Hanks Linduff 2009; Houle 2010; Golden 2011; Legrand 2011; Frachetti 2012), have, during the last decades, represented further steps in this long debated archaeological and socio-anthropological discussion.

Historical Outline

The generic denomination of steppe nomadic or seminomadic peoples encompasses the varied groups who have at times inhabited the steppes of Central Asia, Mongolia, western China and what is now Russia. They most probably contributed to the domestication of the horse, vastly increasing the possibilities of their specific nomadic life, and subsequently emphasized horse-breeding, horse-riding and pastoralism. This, usually, involved trading with settled peoples around and along the steppe edges. They developed new innovations such as the use of chariot, wagon, horse riding and archery, introducing items such as bit, bridle, and the very late stirrups; innovations which crossed the steppe-land at a very rapid rate and were eventually imitated by the settled peoples themselves. The first macroscopic archaeological evidence of this are the archaeological remains in Sintašta, in southern Russia, near the present town of Chelyabinsk, where kurgans, horse and char burials are dated to the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. “Horse people”, then, is a generalized and obsolete term for such nomads, as the term is also sometimes used to describe hunter-gatherer peoples of the North American prairies and South American pampas who started using horses after the Europeans brought them to the Americas.

In the western steppes the most famous group of early nomads were the ones from “Scythia”, a loosely defined region spanning from the Black Sea to eastern Mongolia and a loose political-state formation or federation of groups of peoples covering most of the steppe-land that originated as early as 8th century B.C., and composed, mainly, of Iranian languages speakers. These different groups of Scythians waged war on neighboring civilizations such as the Persians, Greeks, and Mesopotamians.

In the 6th century B.C. the Achaemenid political-imperial state formation, and later Alexander the Great expanded into the edges of the western steppes where the result was a mixing of nomadic and sedentary cultures. The Roman army hired Sarmatians as elite cavalrymen and Europe was exposed to several waves of migrations by “horse people”, from the Cimmerians or pre-Scythians in the 9th century B.C. onward, down to the Migration Period in the early Middle Ages, the Mongols and Seljuks in the late Middle Ages, the Kalmuk, the Kyrgyz and later Kazakhs, down into modern times.

The earliest example of the migration of a “horse people” may be that of the Proto-Indo-Europeans themselves, following the domestication of the horse in the 4th millennium B.C.; and Cimmerians might be the first instance of “equestrian”

steppe nomads known from historical sources who probably contributed to transform the horse from a towing to a mounted animal. Their military strength was, consequently, always based on cavalry, usually marked by prowess as mounted archers.

With these types of nomads specific "burial mounds", the Kurgans, are associated; this generic term indicates graves containing sometimes very elaborate burials. The concept of horse-people was of some importance in 19th century scholarship, in connection with the rediscovery of Germanic pagan culture by Romanticism, which idealized the Goths in particular as a heroic horse-people. Nomadism persists in the steppe-lands, though it has generally been disapproved of by modern states, who have often discouraged it with varying degrees of coercion.

Pastoral Nomadism

The pastoral nomadism of the Central Asian steppes represented one of the greatest forms of economic specialization and cultural adaptation that mankind has ever witnessed (Hazanov 1975; Tosi 1989). This exceptional socio-economic phenomenon was possible only when particular ecological conditions prevailed, which in turn depended upon other factors. Considered from the dawn of time as the best land for grazing and cereal farming, the steppes have always witnessed a mixed economy, in which grazing is combined with farming in different ways, at different times and using different techniques. Farming, despite what is commonly believed, was, therefore, a precondition for grazing which, in this context, appears to have been a choice determined by the conditions of the time and the general rules of economic development. It is, thus, conceivable that there existed a dynamic society in which the nomadic alternative represented a choice made by the semi-nomad or semi-farmer regarding an existential renewal that could be adapted to new geographical, historical and other conditions (Weissleder 1978). This is a typical example of adaptation, in that specialization in animal husbandry represents a response by agro-pastoral groups to the economic uncertainty lurking in outlying areas with low agricultural productivity (Tosi unpublished paper: 23). The high degree of specialization of this mixed economy gradually laid the foundations for an ecological transformation of one of the most fertile areas into one more suitable for grazing which, although constantly gaining momentum, never became irreversible (Tosi 1989). This trend has been considered by other scholars to be the effect of a change in the climate in Middle Asia where, from the 2nd millennium, drier weather prevailed over formerly more humid conditions. Considerable importance has been attached to the study and analysis of ancient pastoral nomadism by researching modern comparative types. By comparing later conditions in Central and Middle Asia, where a certain type of more or less highly developed pastoral nomadism was still practised until recently an attempt was

made to identify factors required to demonstrate analogies between ancient nomadism and modern nomadism. In particular, it is the analysis of the social structure of these conditions, using an anthropological and ethnographic approach, that has attracted the attention of numerous scholars. With the help of historiographical sources, the latter have attempted to find confirmation of the various archaeological interpretations of early nomadism. The ethno-historical data gathered by 18th century travellers and geographers, such as that referring to the Kalmyk hordes (Pallas 1771), forms an essential point of reference for successive researchers and enriches the historical-cultural debate on the forms of socio-political organization of pastoral nomadism. On the basis of a cultural-ecological approach, researchers have always tended to hover between an almost absolute determinism, as a result of which pastoralism is considered simply to be produced by the steppe environment, and a blind ethno-archaeological faith, as a result of which the conditions of early pastoral nomadism differ comparatively little from those of contemporary nomadism. The broad and penetrating view of Lattimore (1951; 1962), although based on the concept of frontier and on the significance of the latter in the Chinese empire, opened up new lines of possible interpretation and had an effect on all studies of Central Asian pastoral nomadism. He was the first to point out the close links between the pastoral world of the steppes and the agricultural world of the vast cultivated areas, which had hitherto been considered both as opposites and as social and political phenomena extraneous to each other. Within the concept of frontier, no longer viewed as a dividing line, but as an extensive area of cultural interaction, this scholar attempted to provide a “functional” explanation of the birth of pastoral societies through what he defined as the five stages of the transition from marginal agricultural conditions to actual pastoral nomadism:

- 1) abandonment of irrigation agriculture and transformation of the countryside into a steppe type;
- 2) increased dependence on animal production owing to lack of cereal storage facilities;
- 3) growing need to travel in order to exploit pastures;
- 4) increased skill in handling herds of horses;
- 5) growing horsemanship skills.

The contributions of Krader (1955a; 1955b; 1978) also practically reversed the conventional notions of pastoral nomadism and still represent an irreplaceable methodological point of reference. The American scholar made a lengthy analysis of the social structure of the steppe-nomads, providing a basis for the identification of the evolutionary factors bearing on it (Tosi unpublished paper: 11). Clearly emphasizing the consanguineous and political aspects of social structure, Krader underlines how patrilinearity represents the essential principle of family structure and clan organization. These analyses of the social structure of the nomadic peoples have clearly shown how all the contemporary pastoral societies of Eurasia included, above all, nuclear and

polygynous families in addition to those of the “extended” type. The predominance of these small families is of course accounted for by the specific nature of the nomadic economy which, in view of the spatio-temporal coordinates of animal husbandry, tends strongly towards a fragmentation of labour. Although monogamy was the rule, polygamy was also retained among the “marriage” rules, though as a practice it was barely tolerated. The nomadic family system, rigidly based on “lineality” and “locality”, i.e. on direct descent on a local basis, displayed the lack of flexibility typical of all clan and tribal organizations. In time, however, the system became increasingly flexible, and was also extended outwards with the establishment of relations based on a tributary type of dependence. The broadening of the social base allowed groups of conquered peoples to yield some of their produce and to discharge obligations of various kinds, without this actually becoming a true form of integration into the socioeconomic structure of the pastoral nomads. This most characteristic form of tributary dependence gradually became the factor which activated an elementary system of class relationships, leading to a type of outwardly directed exploitation rather than one within the social structure. The elite is, for the most part, made up of a clan-type aristocracy with a certain internal differentiation based on blood relations, and by a number of worshippers or priests. This was conceivably the case also for early pastoral nomadism, although it is not always easy, in specific cases, to determine the actual mechanism of these social relations.

At the top of the social pyramid lay the “real” clan, the descendants of which were reckoned exclusively through the father/son relationship, while supreme power was held by the dominant clan in its entirety. The latter was probably able to implement power-sharing by delegating each member of the clan to administer a given group and assigning him a grazing area; a combination of socio-economic factors, including limited productivity, a certain instability, the total absence of intensive farming and private ownership of the land and pastures historically precluded the rise of a true dominant socio-economic class in nomadic society. Certain forms of mutual aid and cooperation remained necessary, above all politico-military organization, which was also based exclusively on the clan and tribe structure. Scholars have never reached full agreement on the social organization of the nomadic peoples. Without ever succeeding in establishing a true political leadership, these peoples gradually built up increasingly extended social units based on the original nuclear family. In this way they succeeded in creating a socio-political system that is very hard to define, as at different times it was post-tribal, pre-state or even imperial. In view of the complexities involved in using social evolution as a unit of measure (Service 1962), it may be claimed that, at the lowest level of political-social organization, i.e. that of the band and then of the tribe, the social solidarity systems are composed to an equal extent of lineages, clans, age groups or residential associations. As one progresses towards early societies with traces of social segmentation, the lineages, by joining in various

degrees, strengths and ways, become the most important factor in social organization. The preservation of this social unity is based on the need for association, for the purposes of both attack and common defence, based on a common ethnos or history (Sahlins 1961; 1963; Rappaport 1967).

In these kinds of societies, leadership, which is hereditary, is invested in important figures that usually have a previous history of leadership and, when the need arises, are called upon to display their worth during the numerous feasts and meetings of a competitive nature, in which they are involved from an early age. These feasts and competitions represent the fundamental occasions of social aggregation and meeting characterized by an accumulation of food and goods above and beyond the needs of domestic consumption. The surplus thus produced is then directed towards numerous ritual and/or trading activities. This is the level at which, particularly in the pastoral societies, one attains a form of primitive "planning" where the fact of being dependent on a comparatively stable decision-making apparatus to some extent makes it possible to plan things that could not be planned before. This level of social complexity is probably the broadest system of subsistence adaptation, within which the various degrees of pastoralism and agropastoralism can develop. Indicators of the existence of such "planning" within the pastoral socioeconomic system may be observed precisely during the festive competitions, during which large stocks of food can be gathered and stocked. Other typical features of this level of social development, such as asymmetrical cattle lending mechanisms, or the unequal number of wives among men, or of head of cattle useable for sacrifices, are some of the existential modes capable of ensuring planning efficiency. A higher level of social organization than the tribe, which has recently been re-proposed (Carneiro 1982; Earle 1987), is the chiefdom. This is made up of political systems in which a number of lineages are held together by the awareness of a common kinship history. The predominant lineage is defined in terms of the value of its position of direct descent or that of its (alleged) relationship with an ancestor. This system ensures the exercise of a stable leadership by fixing all the rank levels in their genealogical position. The establishment of more complex chiefdoms, i.e. systems with richer hierarchical stratification of the ruling classes, led to the rise of other collateral social institutions, as the basic family units are of the multigenerational type and the kinship terms generally of a classificatory nature. The extension of the family base, thus, produces more complex systems in which the ancestors of the leading family are virtually deified and subjected to genealogical worship. In turn, the leaders, whose command systems are considered to be practically sacred, form and/or demand constantly increasing powers, also of a supernatural nature, such as those that can occasionally be yielded during ritual feasts and weddings. The chiefdom type of socio-political system can also be considered as a redistribution mechanism, in the sense that the leaders periodically succeed in collecting from the members of their political system and their subordinates tributes in the form of goods and food supplies. At the same time, they liberally distribute goods and craft

products (Service 1962: 144). This redistribution mechanism is used to finance a life of luxury for the chiefs and their associated elite. Absolute supremacy is guaranteed through the organization of meetings, banquets, rituals, which often provide the occasion for the “symbolic” distribution of the surplus. What distinguishes the complex chiefdom systems from the simpler ones is the large number of hierarchical levels among the authorities and the chief’s ability to impose his authority. The principle of kinship, through which the groups still feel that they are bonded in the chiefdom systems, disappears without a trace in the early state formations precisely because it is, in most cases, a pure invention. The early states may still be marked by kinship relationships, but the political significance of the latter has now been largely superseded by that of institutions established and based directly on territoriality and the principle of royalty. Compared with the preceding forms of leadership, royalty has clearer and stronger rules of succession. This is because a rudimentary form of permanent bureaucracy made up of functionaries, orderlies and administrators, who contribute to guaranteeing the existing social order, begins to exist. The stability of the military defence system is ensured by means of compulsory military service so as to provide an army, and food production tends to be regulated directly by specialists. However, in agro-pastoral regimes, the latter will never become an absolute rule.

The early states differ profoundly from the chiefdom political formations in two main respects, which can also be archaeologically identified:

- 1) the bureaucratization of the system of staple finance (i.e. a system of financing in kind) (Polanyi 1968: 186-188 and 324), by means of the establishment of collection centres for the purpose of storage;
- 2) the setting up of intermediate communities for the purpose of consolidating regional hegemony and of regulating craft production and trade.

The creation of actual emporia or specialized trading centres, set up in outlying locations in a territorial subdivision, generally occurs amongst settled societies, though it is a phenomenon also present amongst the pastoral societies. This aspect is not necessarily an indication of the existence of state structures although it certainly reflects the importance reached by long and medium distance trading as a source of goods and wealth for the aristocracy (Hodges 1982). The most immediate effects of the transformation of socio-political systems of the complex chiefdom type to early states is increased territorial size of the settlements, the presence of extra-urban communities, of areas for specialist craftsmen, increased use of labour in the construction of celebrative buildings (temples?), the luxury nature of grave goods and a strongly sustained long distance trade. All these characteristics already existed in embryonic form at the time of the transition from simple to complex chiefdoms (Gibson and Geselowitz 1988). On the basis of this evidence it is no easy task to establish the level of social evolution attained by nomadic shepherds in Eurasia. It can, however, safely be stated that only rarely did they achieve a state type of political organization like the sedentary peoples.

Ecsedy's (1972; 1977) observations on the Turkic political-state formation between the 6th and 8th centuries A.D. appear fundamental in this regard. On the basis of the terminology used in the Chinese sources, the Hungarian scholar has succeeded in establishing a link between political valences and lineage relations. She sees the formation of the Turkic political-state formation as a process of aggregation after clashes and conflicts from which a dominant lineage emerged triumphant. However, even when the nomadic populations attain a state type of political organization it is so short-lived that its subsequent development is substantially curtailed. Furthermore, the latter stage is attained only during the process of the nomads conquering urban type farming societies. On such occasions, the state type entities established basically represent the political effect of the struggle between the conquering pastoral societies and the conquered agrarian societies. They have been divided by researchers (Hazanov 1975) into two main types: the first based on a tributary type relationship, when integration between nomads and the agrarian population essentially takes place at the political level; the second, characterized by full integration of shepherds and nomads in the infrastructures of the sedentary type of socioeconomic structure. The first type of state has been compared with the so-called second Scythian Kingdom, with the Hun Empire, or the Kaganate of the Khazars, and the Golden Horde. It has been further subdivided into two variants: the first, in which the entity's development comes to an end with the actual occupation of the farmlands, which practically takes the nomads backwards in social development as for instance in the case of the European Huns and, much later, in that of the third Scythian Kingdom and that of the Uighurs.

A second type of state, albeit un-codified, which is thought to have subsumed the first, has been related to the establishment of a social relationship between the conquerors and the conquered. This relationship allows the nomadic component to be rapidly transformed into the dominant class of the sedentarized population or else to merge rapidly with it. The remainder of the nomadic population in this case retains a special status as supplier of military contingents, though it gradually disappears completely. This third type of state, although owing its very existence to the presence of nomads, is thought to have its dominant socioeconomic relationships determined by the socio-political level attained in the regions highly characterized by farming (Parthia, the Kushan State, the Seljuk Empires, the Osmans and the Khulagids). The peculiarly "mobile" nature of the main goods possessed by the nomads, cattle, did not prevent them from representing the very essence of the nomads' individual and private family property. It should be pointed out that the private ownership of land seems to not only have preceded the advent of pastoralism as such but also, in some way, to have represented one of the essential prerequisites. The ties of territorial property are not originally related to forms of nomadic life but begin to appear with the first forms of sedentary settlement, where the relationship between man and territory undergoes a profound change. Nomadic social organization is based on the clan and tribal

relationships, which are probably also further subdivided in various ways. Not necessarily based on a rigid military organization as has always been believed, it was instead supported by strong principles of genealogical kinship, although the latter, in more than one case, was mere instrumental pretence (see below). The various forms of pastoral nomadism identified so far in the Central Asian steppes and competently summarized by Khazanov (1978a: 119–125), are characterized by 5 main groups:

1. absolute mobility of the whole population, without fixed itineraries (Scythians in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C., Huns in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., Avars in the 6th century A.D., Hungarians in the 8th and 9th centuries A.D., Turks (Oghuz in South-Russia) in the 10th century A.D.;
2. mobility of the whole population with comparatively unstable itineraries, with unstable winter centres (contemporary nomadism in the driest regions of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Mongolia);
3. mobility of the entire population with fixed itineraries, set winter quarters and an absence of agriculture (Sarmatians, and modern Kalmyks and part of the Kazakhs);
4. mobility of the entire population during the spring, summer and autumn, with winter quarters in permanent settlements (a form of nomadism characterized by the predominance of cattle raising and ancillary agriculture);
5. mobility of the population during specific parts of the year, the rest of the time being spent in sedentary life (semi-nomadism).

The latter two categories, rather than that of pure nomads, seem to be the ones to which the majority of the Eurasian steppe nomads belong; although cattle raising is always found to prevail over farming. The development of the pastoral economy in Central Asia, to the extent to which it can be reconstructed on the basis of archaeological and historical documents, is marked by several fundamental stages between its origins and the late Middle Ages:

1. birth of a specialized economy (cattle-breeding in the context of a mixed economy);
2. use of equids as draught animals;
3. use of wheeled carts (Piggot 1983: 57–63);
4. development of the two-wheeled horse-drawn war chariot;
5. fully mobile pastoralism and military use of horsemen (Equestrian Nomadism);
6. military use of heavy cavalry and first introduction of stirrups starting in the 4th century A.D. (China and Korea).

The gradually generalized use of carts, chariots and the horse created hitherto undreamed of political opportunities for the development and growth of new elites. This further social specialization developed in mixed socioeconomic

conditions (agricultural and/or pastoral) on the more fertile edges of the steppe, i.e. in those areas where farming cultures had previously flourished more vigorously. It is difficult to ascertain where these political phenomena actually did occur, although on the basis of current archaeological knowledge various and differing possible areas have been proposed. Some scholars (Renfrew 1987) have proposed the edges of the southern forest-steppe belt, west of the Eurasian steppe in Ukraine (neolithic cultures of the Cucuteni and Tripolye) or the lands to the north of the Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian, or the farmlands of Turkmenistan (along the Kelteminar culture line in Central Asia) or any other area in the east with a long standing farming tradition, such as the Yangshao culture in China. Other scholars (Silov 1959; Merpert 1977) instead stressed the importance of different areas, more properly collocated in the Steppe area, where the cultures of Srubnaja, Katakomba, Jamnaja, Srednij Stog or Andronovo spread from.

Ethnic and Identity Groups

Given this state of the art, the interpretative processes concerning the traits of material culture in general, and several types and forms of objects used by the Eurasian nomadic peoples in particular, remain numerous. All are characterized by rather insurmountable obstacles in the identification of each single nomadic group. It goes to the same time that such amount of objects has been, prevalently, found in funerary contexts, including the famous tumulus-like “burial mounds”, named with the equally well-known word “kurgan”.¹

Naturally the social complexity of nomadic societies has always been funded on the close relationship between the family (most likely a nuclear or restricted family) and kinship groups, small communities, lineage, clan, tribe and chiefdom. Communities, lineages and clans were based on either distinctly real or fictitious kinship as well as on seasonal labor cooperation (repairing wells and sheep shearing), on the necessity of defending fellow tribesmen and on the performance of common rites. They also bonded around common causes such as well digging, festival organizing (for weddings and initiations), funeral, rites and feuds. All of these kinds of social interactions contributed to the formation of group identity.

Identity was also forged through oft-repeated rituals and ceremonies. Such joint activity was a good means of social integration. As a result, a social landscape was created that reminded descendants of their common ancestors and

¹ These monumental burials (Jakobson 1987) served as landmark for a community in perpetual movement and constituted the receptacle of symbolic and sacred values of the community. They also acted as a social regulation factor emphasizing and guaranteeing linear descent, also allowing the reconstruction of the lineage. In the meantime, these earth or stone buildings contribute to sacralising the territory around them and keeping the community together. These funerary monuments in particular were often used in periodic ritual ceremonies.

strengthened their identity. One way or another, nomadic polities were divided into several segments, the relationship between which was governed by real or fictitious genealogies. There were several segmental levels down to small communities and single households. The polities were fluid and unstable. They were constantly divided, recreated and reconstructed by peaceful and forcible means.

One may assume that ethnicity is a primordial and permanent characteristic of individuals at birth that is fixed in cultural norms (language, traditions, origin and territory) and is reflected in archaeological results. One may assume on the contrary that ethnicity is not conferred at birth, but is rather a construct acquired by the individual in the course of socialization. The image of an ethnic group is in the mind of each person and ethnicity is of a situational nature and can change with differing circumstances. Thus ethnic identity is continually reconstructed, reinvented and contested.

Ethnic groups are created in the course of intellectual influences of the cultural, political and religious leaders and elites on the masses. This influence contributes to the political mobilization and establishment of ethnic and political units. Ethnic identity depended on the commitments of the people to the chief and his clan, under whose name and banner they battled. The notion of ethnic devotion to the nation in that time period seems odd. One may suggest the motivation of loyalty to the chief or family group, but not devotion to the nation or country. The characteristics of ancient nomadic peoples were an overlap of ethnic and political terminology. Thus ethnic symbols were predominantly political.

Archaeological Correlates

Finally I would like to dedicate some conclusive remarks to two of the main expressive ways of technical-stylistic, figurative and/or of visual capabilities that many peoples referable to the typology of nomads and semi-nomads of the steppe have been able to realize; the so-called “animal style”² and “rock-art”.

“Animal style” was widely used and appears, at the level of archaeological documentation, in different periods and regions (from southern Russia up to Siberia and beyond, from the Bronze Age to the Medieval period), despite cultural ways of life and existential approaches that were sometimes distant and even different from each other. They were united, nevertheless, by the aspects reflecting

² It is rooted in a vast spiritual, religious and magical substratum, where depictions of deer, felines, and birds of prey are preferred. Whole figures or anatomical details of the animals are rendered at the same time in a realistic and fantastic way. The image mixes the naturalistic elements of the animal's body and encodes them, selects them, deforms them and repeats them. The meaning of animal representations is related to totemism, shamanism, and protective and apotropaic functions.

pastoral nomadism, which, ultimately, marked a difference with the cultural world of the sedentary peoples.

This style has its roots in a vast spiritual, religious and sometimes magical substrate and prefers depictions of felines as well as deer and other prey, whose anatomical details are rendered in a way that is both realistic and fantastic, as seen in particular in the representations and positions of the animal, like the “flying gallop”, the “contortionism”, the “dancing” and the “zoomorphic conjunction” etc. These images mix natural elements of the animal's body and encode, select, deform and repeat them. The meaning of this kind of animal representation is considered to be related to totems and shamanism, protector and apotropaic functions; realistic and the fantastic combine in a quite unusual way reminiscent of hyperrealism.

Rock-art in its cyclical return and rituality represents a late prehistoric Eurasian cultural phenomenon mostly from Central Asia, Mongolia and China, and representations were often in the open-air, on boulders and stone-walls. They expressed through a sophisticated engraving technique ways and modes of living and occupying the territory since Bronze/Iron Age, and have different chronological assessments, specific typology, and iconography. Rock-art, through iconographic values including the “animal style” already widespread over the immense related territory, most probably expressed a kind of rituality where water sources, pastoral campsites, and engravings represent a unified practical and conceptual vision.

A contextual approach between rock-art, rituality, and landscape helps one to understand in a long-term perspective the ancient related sites as they combine with the present seasonal campsites of the pastoral movement with their cyclical return, reiteration, rituality and palimpsest panels.

The local inhabitants materialise a complex and conscious way of being in the mountain landscape in this palimpsest rock-art where we can see the confirmation of the hypothesis of a reiteration of the engraving action over time, possibly mirroring the recurrent seasonal returns to certain pastoral sites in the mountains over time.

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