

Social Complexity in Prehistoric Eurasia: Monuments, Metals, and Mobility, edited by Bryan K. Hanks & Katheryn M. Linduff, 2009. New York (NY): Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-51712-6 hardback £50 & US\$95; xx+417 pp., 97 figs., 11 tables

Alan K. Outram

Before the end of the Soviet Union there was very little detailed work one could read, in English, about the prehistory of the Eurasian steppe zone, and archaeologists in that region were largely isolated from non-Soviet archaeological discourse. Over the last two decades there has been considerable activity in this research area, with many teams from America and western Europe collaborating with local archaeologists in substantial field projects and programmes of scientific analysis. Whilst still rather limited, English language works on the archaeology of the region have increased significantly, including a number of major syntheses and conference proceedings. Many of the earlier edited volumes were largely synthetic in nature, or simply provided an opportunity for former Soviet archaeologists to publish in English for the first time. What is now happening is that novel data, theories and conclusions, based upon new collaborative research, are beginning to appear. This current volume stems from a conference held at the University of Pittsburgh (something of a hotspot for Eurasian archaeological studies) in 2006, and it demonstrates how many new collaborative projects are beginning to bear

CAJ 20:3, 467–8 © 2010 McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
doi:10.1017/S0959774310000582

fruit. The volume is dominated by American-led research, but also has significant chapters by Mongolian, Chinese, Israeli and Russian authors.

The volume opens with a foreword by Colin Renfrew that highlights some of the key overarching questions in Eurasian archaeological research. He draws particular attention to whether key influences in culture and language have an east–west, or west–east trajectory and discusses the significance of horses and the need to distinguish between their importance for food, herding and military power. Hanks and Linduff’s introduction, however, focuses upon more detailed questions relating to local paths to complexity, migration versus diffusion and technology and social practice. Their emphasis is upon drawing out the variability of social practices amongst mobile herding people, rather than assuming homogeneity amongst steppe pastoralist groups. This reaction against simplistic assumptions regarding pastoralist economies, politics and societies is a cornerstone of the majority of the papers in the volume. The study of complexity amongst mobile herders is itself complex, multifaceted and regionally and temporally varied.

The book comprises four parts: (1) Framing Complexity, (2) Mining, Metallurgy and Trade, (3) Frontiers and Border Dynamics, and (4) Social Power, Monumentality and Mobility. The first section on complexity is introduced by Koryakova, who summarizes the key themes of the following four papers. Frachetti’s paper compares the nature of complexity in three different case-study regions of Eurasia using a highly theoretical framework partly derived from institutional economists. Epimakhov also investigates the nature of complexity and is keen to draw a distinction between the identification of political hierarchy and complexity. He notes that other facets of life can make it complex, such as specialization. Anthony looks for the origins of the Sintashta Culture, with its impressive fortified settlements and chariot burials. He argues that a climatic downturn in the late third millennium BC may well have led to the aggregation of peoples and the defence of key resources. Part of his argument relates to one of Renfrew’s key questions; were horses used for military purposes? Anthony argues, contrary to others, that the Sintashta chariots were actively used by warriors in action. The final chapter in this section, by Kohl, discusses what lies behind the incredible bronze wealth of the Maikop Culture, which now appears to have rather earlier dates than previously thought.

Part Two, on mining, metallurgy and trade, is introduced by Linduff, who draws attention to the need for accurate dating sequences, and the potential conflict between absolute dating programmes and traditional typological sequences. Chernykh summarizes just such a programme of absolute dating, largely based upon radiocarbon determinations. This is a hugely useful chapter that provides a thorough synthesis of nearly 1700 dates, accompanied by excellent maps. There is little doubt that this chapter will be heavily utilized by scholars in the field. In a very clearly expressed chapter, Hanks also looks at the Sintashta phenomenon, but considers its wider trade networks and interactions. Han and Li provide an overview of the bronze material culture of the Dian Culture of northern China

with special reference to tin plating technologies. This contribution is particularly well illustrated. Peterson deals with bronze production and trade in the Volga region and presents detailed evidence based upon chemical assay and metallographic analysis. Mei addresses early metallurgy in northwest China and presents a lengthy discussion regarding links between that region and the Steppe.

The third section of the volume, dealing with frontiers and borders, is introduced in a thought-provoking manner by Barfield. He draws the analogy between the considerable success of horse-riding pastoralists across a vast region of Eurasia and Plains Indians of America. The analogy relates to the way that mobile horse-based cultures can become dominant in a region, but also the way in which too much attention upon that particular cultural form, by archaeologists and anthropologists, can mask considerable variability in economy and society. This analogy is good for making that specific point, but I do not think it should be stretched any further. Shelach considers power and politics in the eastern steppe. Whilst suggesting that climate change may have had a role in political changes, he does not believe that is enough in of itself. He employs multivariate analysis of cemeteries to look at social change, dealing with variables such as different forms of symbolism, evidence of militarism and signs of actual violence. Bunker discusses what the Chinese referred to as the 'Beifang' in their Northern frontier zone during the first millennium BC and notes that this term hides much local variation. In this sense, it is a little similar to the way people have used the blanket term 'Celt' in late Iron Age western Europe, as a result of the writings of Caesar. Popova stays with the topic of local variations by looking at the diversity of foragers and pastoralists in the Volga–Ural region.

Introduced by Allard, Part Four exclusively addresses monumentality in the Mongolian Steppe. All three chapters, by Honeychurch, Wright and Amartuvshin, Houle and Fitzhugh, essentially discuss the same topic, the transition from the use of large, communally-constructed khirigsuurs (large, complex, stone mounds with enclosures) to later, simpler slab burials. All discuss the possible social and political changes that may have led to this shift, from different perspectives.

There is little doubt that this volume is essential reading for those working in the region, and it contains many novel ideas and new datasets. It is striking, however, just how little we still know about this vast and important area during its prehistory. As well as giving a thorough summary of the current state of knowledge, this volume is excellent in helping one identify new avenues of research. Sometimes future research priorities are explicitly signposted (Hanks is particularly clear about the identification of key research questions and how to tackle them in the future), but in other cases the reader is left to spot the holes in the evidence for themselves. Whilst there is constant discussion of issues like levels of mobility and the variability of pastoral practices, much of this is assumed from relatively limited evidence bases, and much is asserted rather than demonstrated. It is clear that the region needs much further work on environmental and climatic reconstruction along with new programmes of zooarchaeology, archaeobotany and residue

analysis. Stable isotope assays on humans, animals and items of material culture will help us understand mobility and trade much better. There is a considerable need for wide-scale survey programmes to identify more ephemeral site types, often overlooked in favour of impressive monuments. Whilst large dating programmes have been undertaken, there are still considerable gaps in absolute sequences of dates within the region. Many exciting projects are now addressing these issues, many undertaken by authors in this volume, and I look forward to seeing the field develop quickly over the next few years.

Alan K. Outram
 Department of Archaeology
 University of Exeter
 Laver Building
 North Park Road
 Exeter
 EX4 4QE
 UK
 Email: a.k.outram@exeter.ac.uk