

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EURASIAN NOMADS

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Summary

The Eurasian steppe cultures gave root to many human activities. Steppe nomads invented the saddle and stirrup as well as a prototype of the violin. They developed clothing suited for a life spent in the saddle, an easily transportable home (the yurt), and distinctive food products based on mare's milk. From the earliest times into the Middle Ages powerful nomadic kingdoms repeatedly arose to assume dominion over the known world, and the names of their dynamic leaders such as Chingis-khan, Batu-khan, and Attila are still synonymous with brilliance in military and administrative strategy. Less well known is the nomad's role in linking the developing civilizations of the east and the west and their lasting contributions to world culture in general.

1. Introduction

The Eurasian steppes encompass an enormous area from the north Balkans to eastern Mongolia. Environmentally, the Eurasian steppe zone is a relatively monotonous and treeless 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, tracts of the Eastern European forests and the Siberian taiga define the Steppes, while in the southwest the Black Sea coast and the Caucasus provide steppe boundaries. Further east, the Caspian and Aral Seas, the sands of the great Central Asian deserts, and the Pamir and Sayan mountain ranges define the southeastern border. Generally Eurasian Steppe is open space, which is sometimes called "Steppes belt" or "Steppes corridor."



Figure 1. Eurasian Steppes

At the beginning of the third millennium BC, a mobile group of cattle and sheep breeders appeared in the steppes north of the Caspian Sea between the lower Volga-river and the southern Urals Mountains. At about the same time a culturally and physically similar population appeared in the Asian steppes of southern Siberia and the Altay Mountains. Some scholars believe that they were the descendants of the first Indo-Europeans who came first to the Volga-Uralian region from the Near East or Middle East. These peoples had 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. However, neither animal breeding nor agriculture was the principal economy.

In the second half of the second millennium BC, the steppe population moved first within their traditional ecological zone, and then far beyond their original boundaries. Paleogeographic studies suggest that among the causes for these movements was increasing aridity, especially in the eastern regions of the steppes. Large population groups pushed outward in search of more verdant pastures for their cattle. The earliest finds of horse harness elements that belong 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.

By the eighth–seventh centuries BC, specialized stockbreeders had determined the main direction taken by rapid ethnogenetic, political, and general historical development in the steppes. They mastered horseback riding and were thus able to move quickly

through vast territories, resulting in a growing interaction between the populations of different, and sometimes quite distant, areas. Advanced achievements in the economy and in the production of material wealth spread in a chain-like manner throughout the steppes. These achievements also brought mutual spiritual enrichment to the participants. Some unions of stockbreeders became unusually active, and the nomads became acquainted with the Eurasian steppes. Since this time, the nomads of Eurasia began to play an outstanding role in the European and Asian history.

To the north of the steppes is a forest zone occupied by different tribes with another, and quite distinctive, traditional economical-cultural way of life. The border between steppes and wood-steppes zone was never stable. Periodically, climatic changes brought about shifts in the border that caused population migrations. To the south of the steppe is an almost uninterrupted circuit of mountains and great deserts (as Kara-Khum and Kizil-Khum) that stretched from the Near East and south Asia. The first farming economies and the most ancient agricultural civilizations developed in this zone. The natural-geographical characteristics of the steppe determined the direction of economic development of the steppe population since at least the Eneolithic period.

Both a unity and variety of ecological conditions simultaneously characterize the steppe zone of Eurasia. Mainly this zone is a plain (steppe “belt”) that stretched out for almost 11 000 kilometers, and includes the southern part of Eastern Europe and northern Asia. Sometimes the steppes are extended and sometimes they are narrowed into narrow corridors. In the West they cover the Southern Ukraine, part of the Crimea, Northern Caucasia, the Low Volga-river area, and the Southern Ural, extending to the huge spaces of Kazakhstan, Baraba, and Kulundi. To the East they are reduced to the narrow corridor between the Northern Altay Mountains and the taiga zone. Further to the East they again are extended to the steppes of Southern Siberia, Central Asia, and Transbaikalia all the way to Mongolia.

The soils of the steppes are quite varied. Thus, the Black Sea area has black earth, Southern Siberia has a corpulent humus layer, and Crimea, the Volgo-Uralian region, and Central Asia have droughty alluvium. The relief of the homeland of the nomads is also rather diverse. Generally it is possible to define four types of geographical zones here. Open flat wide spaces with steppe and wood-steppe natural growth occur in the Ukraine, the Volgo-Uralian region, and Kazakhstan. Foothills are found in Crimea, Northern Caucasia, Southern Ural, and the southeast part of Kazakhstan. Hollows and valleys closed by mountains occur in southern Turkmenia and Khasahstan. And big river deltas with vast flood plains are found in the Lower Don, the Lower Volga, and the Lower Amy River and Syr Darya River. Natural landscape differences such as these played the key role in the formation of early nomadic cultures, and led to some differences in the economy of the various populations that inhabited the steppe zone in the Early Iron Age.

Another important factor was hydrology. The large rivers of Europe and Asia flowed through the Steppes. They include the Danube, the Dnieper, the Don (known in the past as the Tanais), the Volga (the Itil), the Ural River, the Amu-Darya (the Ox), the Syr Darya (the Yxart), the Ob, the Irtish, and the Yenisei. Of course, these rivers put obstacles in the way of communications of the steppe population, and, in general, they

served as natural borders between different ethnic communities. But, like deserts and mountains, they have never been impenetrable walls in the process of inter-ethnic connections. That is why the steppe zone of Eurasia is sometimes named the “steppe corridor.”

After the steppes populations invented the first chariots and then harnesses for riding, cultural achievements and innovations began to spread very quickly inside of this zone. This was the reason for similarities both in the material and spiritual culture of the peoples who lived far from each other. So, an essentially undeviating burial tradition emerged in which deceased warriors were accompanied by a characteristic set of grave goods, including armament, horse harness accoutrements, and specific “animal style” used to adorn some subjects of warrior’s equipment. In the Russian literature this complex of artifacts, being constant in time and space, has been termed the “Scythian triad.” The term “Scythian” was used because the first artifacts of this type were archaeologically registered in the graves that probably belonged to the historical Scythians described by Herodotus.

The term “Scytho-Siberian World” or even “Scytho-Siberian Unity” is used to stress the common features of the archaeological cultures spread over the huge territory from Danube to Mongolia. At the same time, ceramics, objects of everyday use, mortuary practice, and other indicators of ethnic and cultural similarity were significantly different in the societies that compose the so-called “Scytho-Siberian World.” Neighboring cultures are even more similar, yet they retained originality. The situation could be explained by the dynamic reorganization of the economies and lifeways connected with the transition to nomadism within the ecologically similar Steppe Belt. So, the concept of the “Scytho-Siberian Unity” should be substituted with “cultural horizon.” A cultural horizon must be interpreted not as unity but rather as “Eurasian cultural continuity.”

In the Black-Sea area, the Scytho-Siberian World adjoined with ancient Greece *polis* in central Asia, first with Achaemenidae Persia and then, after the invasion of Alexander the Great, with the Late Hellenistic States of Greece, Bactria and Parfia. In the Far East, the cultural world of the Ordos nomads developed close to ancient China’s civilization. In the West, the Thracian World, and later Galshtadts and Latens cultures, developed in contact with Scythians and Sarmatians. Due to their mobility, the Eurasian nomads served as peculiar carriers and “retransmitters” of the different technical achievements and spiritual ideas for the numerous populations that inhabited Eurasia. They also took an active part in forming the many ethnosis that inhabit the Eurasian continent today.

Soil and paleogeographical investigations testify to connection between climatic changes, which brought about deterioration in the steppe ecology, and the transition from the semi-sedentary and partially agrarian life of the Bronze Age populations to nomadic stock breeding. Both archaeological and ethnological studies indicate that from ancient times the use of natural resources depended upon the ecological situation in the each concrete region, which could be mountains, foothills, large river valleys and deltas, or deserted plains. This situation was also reflected in the formation and development of

economic-cultural types. The distinctions between the types were caused not only by ethnic-social reasons but also by the sharp contrasts in natural conditions.

Several economic-cultural types developed within the limits of the central Asian historical-cultural area. They were settled plough farmers (who used irrigation systems), semi-settled stock-breeders and farmers, and nomads and semi-nomads—cattle-breeders and stock-breeders of the steppes. But different subtypes that existed within each economic-cultural type of cattle-breeders and nomads reflected local specificity of the landscape zones. So, in the north of Kazakhstan severity of winters (with low temperatures and strong winds) forced cattle-breeders to drive cattle to the south, where herds were concealed inside of chine ridges or in sand dunes. The cattle-breeders of the southern warm deserts tended herds during the year or drove them to the mountain meadows. The mountain steppes and meadows were used as summer pastures in the East. In the winter, cattle were hidden in the deep valleys, and alpine pastures were used in the summer. As a rule, seasonal winter sites were used from year to year for many centuries. There were warm steppe zones in central Kazakhstan characterized by a pattern of sheep-breeding and horse-breeding with long migrations. In the southwest of Turkmenistan camels, sheep, and goats predominated in the herd. The particular routes of movement were caused by the location of water sources and wells. In contrast, in the southern and eastern regions of Turkmenistan, where mountains are found, various kinds of stock-breeding (distant-pasture, nomadic, pastoral, barnyard-distant-pasture, and mountain pasture) developed. The seasonal migrations of the stock-breeders mainly had a vertical character. But cattle-breeding went with agriculture, to some extent, almost everywhere.

The Archaic economic-cultural type with a semi-settled, complex pastoral-agricultural-fishing economy remained in the rivers-delta regions. Naturally watered lands provided the inhabitants with millet, pumpkin, and melon; extensive reeds or canes were good feed crop for large horned cattle. Channels and floods gave fishing a good chance. From ethnological sources, it is well known that this economic-cultural type, which combined cattle breeding and agriculture, elements of the classic nomadism (such as portable yurt), and settled-agricultural culture (for example, winter wattle and daub houses and so on), was preserved here into the nineteenth century. All of these ecological features caused the unique characteristics of the archaeological complexes that descended from the different regions of the central Asian and European steppes.

2. The Origin of Eurasian Nomadism

During the period before the first nomads, Scythians and Sakians tribes appeared in the historical arena. These Bronze Age inhabitants of the vast steppe expanse were of diverse genetic origins. They had mixed farming-pastoral economies and engaged in hunting, gathering, and river fishing. They bred domestic animals, and in some places cultivated plants using primitive irrigation systems. Neither animal breeding nor agriculture, however, was the principal economy. The similarities observed in their material cultures were mostly due to generally comparable ecological conditions, levels of economic development, and the absence of serious geographic obstacles that could impede direct interaction among neighboring groups.

In the second millennium BC the steppes of Eurasia were inhabited by two kindred populations, today represented by two major archaeological cultures: the Timber-Grave (Srubnaya), and Andronovo. 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 took place in their contact zone.

During the Bronze Age, tools, implements of labor, and decorative objects were made of stone, bone, wood, and bronze. In the second half of the second millennium BC, the steppe population moved first within their traditional ecological zone and then far beyond their original boundaries. Some elements of the characteristic material culture in the steppe area appeared in various regions extending from the Caucasus Mountains to the southern regions of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Some archaeologists and physical anthropologists support migration theories, that is, a long-distance southward movement of people from Eurasian steppes to central Asia, northern India, and the Iranian plateau in the late second millennium BC. Paleogeographical studies provide material suggesting that among the causes for these movements was increasing aridity, especially in the eastern regions of the steppes. Large population groups pushed outward in search of more verdant pastures for their cattle. The earliest finds of horse harnesses 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 steppes, and in some regions, especially where natural conditions did not undergo significant changes, the previous traditional, complex form of economy survived.

By the eighth-seventh centuries BC, however, specialized stockbreeders had determined the main direction that the rapid ethnogenetic, political, and general historical development in the steppes took. Some unions of stockbreeders became unusually active, the nomads became acquainted with the Eurasian steppes, and they began to use iron implements. Even at this initial stage, the Early Iron Age was marked by a sharp rise in the social development of stock-breeding communities that ultimately developed into defined social strata. A marked increase of material production and the evolution of spiritual culture accompanied this phenomenon. Rapid perfection of horse harness design and techniques of arms production were also noted, as armament types became more diverse. Nomadic ideologies were reflected in various artifacts decorated in the traditional so-called “Scytho-Siberian animal style.”

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Biographical Sketch

Leonid T. Yablonsky is a Professor in the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, where he received his Doctorate (Ph.D) in Historical Sciences. His research interests include Archaeology; Physical anthropology; Paleoecology; Ethnogenesis; Ethnic history of the nomads and cattle breeders of Eurasian steppes and semi deserts; History of the ancient Choresmian and Central Asian populations; and the Archaeology and physical anthropology of the ancient Volga-Ural region populations. Dr Yablonsky has participated in 34 seasons of excavation in Central Russia, Northern Caucasus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Southern Urals, and has published 150 papers and articles. His books include *Nomads of the Eurasian Steppes in the Early Iron Age* (edited with V. A. Bashilov and J. Davis-Kimball); *Kurgans on the Left Bank of the Ilek* (written with J. Davis-Kimball); and *Nekropoli Drevnego Khorezma (Necropolises of the Ancient Chorasmia)*.