Some Controversial Problems in the Study of Bronze Age Sites in the Volga-Manich Steppes

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problem, which type of economy and culture type the Bronze Age finds in the steppe land located between the rivers of Volga and Manych are to be assigned to. Following the history of research, three stages in dealing with this issue can be distinguished: the theory of the first stage assigns the finds to cattle breeding cultures; in the second stage it was argued that it was a culture of nomadic cattle breeders, in the third stage both theories were put forward simultaneously. However, these research results were based on finds from burials only. Material recovered from Settlements that, due to their small proportions, are only considered as seasonal Settlements of cattle breeders, remain virtually unexplored. Consequently, a new method of research is called for, in the opinion of the author.

Key Words: Volga-Manich steppe, Burials, Kurgans (barrows), Settlements, Sedentary and nomadic population, Bronze Age epoch, Early and Middle Age nomads epoch

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So far, the study of the culture of the Bronze Age population in East Eurasian steppes has been largely based on the analysis of burial site evidence while the traces of the places where they lived (camps and settlements) have been scarcely taken into consideration. The settlements with cultural layers in the steppe zone are not numerous. Others containing some traces of habitation were traditionally classified as “seasonal camps” of mobile cattle breeders for their small size and ephemeral cultural layer. These factors contributed to the spread of the idea developed by Russian archeology that nomadism began in the steppe zone stretching from the Black sea to the Urals during the Bronze Age. The question has been discussed for more than fifty years. The discussion began with F. Hanchar’s monumental treatise “The Horse in Prehistoric and Early Historic Time” (Hanchar 1955). He was the first to make a conclusion that “the open steppes” from “Pontus to the Caspian” had all the conditions for an early (as early as Bronze Age) development of cattle breeding. The beginning of the process, according to F. Hanchar, was connected with the period of early Catacomb culture, and its completion was associated with the time of late Srubnaya culture. He also pointed out a special character of western Caspian, or “Kalmyk”, steppes where in his opinion the conditions for nomadic cattle breeding (short winters without snow and correspondingly long vegetation periods) were created by nature itself (Hanchar, 1955, 109, map 5). The maps presented by him show the picture of exploitation of the territory in the late 40s when he was writing the book. The Kalmyks were still in their Siberian exile at the time and their lands were used chiefly as winter pastures by the neighboring regions (Stalingradskaya, Stavropolskaya and Astrakhanskaya oblasts) as they were divided between them. On this basis, F. Hanchar divided the whole territory into three zones in accordance with their dryness and respective quality of pastures. He paid special attention to kurgan 9 from the burial of Tri Brata (Three Brothers) where in 1929 the remains of a cart with wooden wheels, a clay model of a cart, and animal bones were found, which served as one of the most vivid signs of nomadic cattle breeding economy and everyday life being developed at the time. His work was so influential that all the researchers following him tried to solve the problem of the origin of cattle breeding on the basis of the evidence found in Bronze Age kurgans in the steppes stretching between the Black and Caspian seas (Shilov, 1964, 86-102; 1975; 1981, 23-34; 1985, 118-126; Merpert,
However a number of other researchers repeatedly pointed out the methodological fallacy of studying only burials without taking into consideration the settlements. In the book published as early as 1935 it was shown that the percentage ratio of animal bones in the burials differed from the corresponding data of the settlements (Kruglov, Podgaetsky, 1935).

In his article “To the Question of the Level of Development of Production Forces in Early Bronze Age Epoch” B.A. Latinin called attention to the ambiguous character of the term “pastoral” used to describe the tribes of Bronze Age. In his opinion the term “pastoral” “had no concrete meaning but still implied a possibility of cattle breeding in this early epoch without any grounds” (Latinin, 1957, 10). B.A. Latinin repeated the proposition he made already in 1935 that “conclusions concerning the level of the development of production forces, technology, character and forms of economies based on the study of burials may lead only to mistakes”, as “the arrangement of a burial structure, burial ceremonies, accompanying articles and food usually reflect the actual state and level of culture only to a limited extent and in an artificially distorted way …” (Latinin, 1957, 13).

A number of western scholars expressed their doubts and criticism about the idea of the nomadic character of the Bronze Age population in East European steppes, in particular concerning some of the points under discussion. Thus, R. Hachmann pointed out that “there was too much risk” in interpreting Black Sea cattle breeders as nomads since the settlements have not been sufficiently investigated while burial data are almost of no relevance in solving this problem (Hachmann, 1991, 699-713). The researchers investigating early psalia and carts supported R. Hachmann’s criticism (Häusler, 1994, 230-248, Hüttel 1994, 197-215). A. Nagler also pointed out that kurgan burials gave an idea about the upper strata of the society while to have a picture of the whole society first of all the settlements should be studied (Nagler, 1996, 66).

At his time Karl Jettmar in his article “Early Nomads” or “Northern Nomads” presented a rather complete historiography of the problem underlying the fact that both the point of view of those who supported the theory under discussion as well
as that of their opponents were outdated. He also added that the solution of the problem had to be found by future generations of scholars (Jettmar, 1983, 41).

The Ukrainian researchers, having analyzed the burial data, also presented the facts refuting this theory. Applying uniform methods of analysis of data and their interpretation, K. Bunyatan showed the dynamic correlation of farming and cattle breeding in the period of Yamnaya, Catacomb, Sabatinovskiy, Srubnaya culture of pottery and Belozersky culture. Summing up, the researcher makes a conclusion that cattle breeding was most likely to remain the most stable branch of economy while the role of farming in the steppes was subject to fluctuations, dropping significantly in catastrophic periods (Bunyatyan, 2000, 30-40).

Y. Rassamakin paid special attention to the problems of reconstruction of the Bronze Age economy. The analysis of the available data allowed him to make a conclusion that despite the climatic fluctuations the agriculture in Northern Black Sea steppes was part of the economic development throughout the Bronze Age. This is completely supported by the evidence. According to Y. Rassamakin’ data, the conditions necessitating the development of a nomadic way of life in Northern Black sea steppes never existed. The scholar points out that as the records show, nomadic communities always came to the northern Black Sea steppes from the east (Rassamakin, 2000, 59-157; see the historiography in greater detail in Ochir-Goryaeva, 2002, 87-98).

It seems that it is time to overcome the bias in the research in favor of one group of sources and finally take into consideration the data provided by the traces of dwelling places and settlements in terms of new methodological approaches.

Special attention in the framework of the theory of nomadism is given to Lower Volga steppes and in particular to the right bank of the river as the driest part of the steppe zone. Having this very stretch of the East European steppes in mind (the major part of which belongs to modern Republic of Kalmykia), V.P. Shilov formulated seven important arguments supporting the idea of nomadic cattle breeding in Bronze Age.

They are as follows:

1. the natural and geographic environment unsuitable for agriculture;
2. the absence of long term sedentary settlements;
3. the absence of positive archeological data in favor of a significant role of farming;
4. the herd composition identified by the remains of burial feast food;
5. the tradition of making kurgans;
6. “absolute impossibility to lead a sedentary lifestyle”
7. the presence of transport means in the burials of Yammaya and Pre-Caucasus cultures (Shilov, 1975, 81-2).

The list can be continued with two more arguments formulated by M.I. Artamonov which however had been refuted by L. Klein. Thus, according to M.I. Artamonov, firstly, Srubnaya culture with its typical agricultural branch of economy was absent in the Caspian steppes; his second argument is that nomadic cattle breeding was associated with “certain progress both in terms of labor productivity and a rise in the producers’ well-being” (Artamonov, 1977, 12).

However, referring to V.A. Safronov’s works, L.S. Klein disproved the fact that srubny burials were absent in the kurgans of Kalmykia and, referring to G. Y. Markov’s research, he refuted the fact of a steady increase of herds and a progressive character of nomadic cattle breeding (Klein, 1980, 34).

Taking into consideration what has been stated above, it is still worthwhile to have another critical look at the arguments in favor of an early (as compared with other regions of Eurasian steppes) development of cattle breeding economy in a single region, that is the Volga-Manich steppes in the Bronze Age.

Let us classify V.P. Shilov’s arguments into three groups. Group 1 includes arguments 1 and 6 as these characterize the region in question in terms of its economy and geography. Group 2 consists of arguments 2 and 3 which interpret Bronze Age settlements as short term camps. Group 3 contains burial site data concerning the economy and lifestyle of Bronze Age population (arguments 4, 5, 7).

Let us begin our critical survey with group 1 containing arguments 1, concerning the unfavorable environment for farming, and 6, about the impossibility of a sedentary lifestyle. V.P. Shilov paid special attention to the reconstruction of the natural-geo-
graphic environment of the region. Taking into consideration the results of palinogogical tests and the analysis of lake sapropel layers, as well as referring to the experts’ conclusions in the field, he makes a conclusion that “the natural-geographic environment in Lower Volga have not undergone any considerable changes since Neolithic, Bronze and Early Iron Age” (Shilov, 1975, 63). The recent research of specialists studying paleosoils based on a considerable amount of data also shows that the natural and climatic conditions in Lower Volga pertaining to the epochs under discussion are of a similar character (Dyomkin, 1997, 145-162).

However it is still possible to give a fact disproving arguments 1 and 2. This is the example of exploiting the territory in question by Russian and Ukrainian peasants resettling here since late 18th c. at first spontaneously but then according to Ukaz of December 30, 1846 “On Settling the Roads on Kalmyk Lands in Astrakhan Government” (Belousov, 1992). The economic activity of such settlements may be seen as an excellent example of economic and cultural adaptation to new natural and climatic conditions in a strange ethnic and cultural environment. The farming did not become the leading branch of economy but it met the requirements of the local population in wheat and other plants, while a number of agricultural products were grown even for sale. The most popular among them were rye and wheat, which were in great demand and had the highest price. Hemp, flax, and especially tobacco and mustard were produced exclusively for sale. In the 60s of the 19th century, the peasants of the Kalmyk steppes supplied Sarepta factories with over 40 thousand pood of mustard seed. Vegetable growing and water-melon and melon cultivation were also among agricultural activities. Part of the vegetables was taken to neighboring governments for sale. It is worth mentioning gardening as another specialty of peasants. Many villages were famous for their gardens where almost every kind of fruit trees was grown (Belousov, 1992, 147). However the main branches of economy for newly arrived peasants were cattle breeding and fishing. The latter became most important for peasants who lived along the bank of the river. The fish products were taken to the markets of adjacent villages and towns of North Caucasus. For the rest of the population the importance of cattle breeding cannot be overestimated as it was cattle breeding which laid the foundations of their material affluence, a fact the contemporaries kept wondering about for a long time. The favorable conditions
for cattle breeding were of a natural character in the steppe where it rarely snowed in winters, which made possible year-round pasturing of the cattle, and the pastures were spacious for that. The cattle was bought by the peasants mostly from local Kalmyks not only for its cheap price but also taking into consideration the fact that they kept those breeds which were most adapted to the steppe conditions and did not require much care or special conditions of keeping.

The peasants reasonably combined winter pasturing of their cattle with additional rations of laid-in hay or green reeds. They also built temporary or permanent barns and stalls for their cattle. In contrast to the nomadic economy of the Kalmyks, whose herds were dominated by sheep, the settlers kept mostly Kalmyk breeds of neat cattle.

Rapid development of cattle breeding gave an impetus to an emergence of a khutor (farmstead) system of economy. At farmsteads their owners or hired hands looked after most of their cattle kept there. Thus, in 1871, there were 33 khutors (2.9 peasant homesteads per a khutor); in 1966, there were already 88 with 111 homesteads (1.2 per a khutor); in 1878, 121 khutors and 894 homesteads (7.3 per one); and in 1897, 196 khutors with 1536 homesteads (7.8 per one). According to the census of 1897, the total population of farmsteads was 10, 990 people, or 19.7% of the settlers. Despite the elements of stalled cattle keeping characterized above the peasants still might have suffered significant losses if the winter was long with considerable snow-fall, if there were outbreaks of cattle plague, foot-and-mouth disease, and anthrax, and if the cattle were driven away by Kalmyks. In such cases, a complex character of their economy was of special importance as due to their farming the peasants survived and again restored their herds. The advantage of a complex economy based on a combination of cattle breeding and farming is also vividly shown by the following statistics. In 1879 the nomadic Kalmyks of Bolshekerbetsky ulus had 16 times more cattle than the peasants, while in 1890 the increase of the total Kalmyk herd was by 1.3 times, and the growth of the peasants’ herd was by 65.5 times. In total the Kalmyks’ herd was three times smaller as compared with that of the peasants. It is notable that the peasants had only fewer numbers of horses (by 2.5 times) and camels (by 2 times) than the Kalmyks (Burchinova, Komanzhaev, 1989, 31-32).

According to the statistics section of the agricultural department of 1854, the average
number of cattle per each person of the settlers in Kalmykia was two times higher than that of the state peasants of Astrakhanskaya government, “one of the richest in cattle throughout Russia” (Belousov, 1991, 159).

As this brief survey shows, under the conditions of arid steppes the settlers had complex cattle-breeding and farming economy of a sedentary kind. It was due to this complex character of their economy that they survived throughout hard times and at the same time had considerable advantages over the purely nomadic cattle breeding economy of the Kalmyks.

The nomadic cattle breeding of the Kalmyks which required more spacious pastures suffered most from a gradual decrease of the territory of Kalmyk uluses resulting from the growth of the sedentary population. That was the reason why some Kalmyk uluses had to use the same pastures in winters and summers and hence suffered losses due to a shortage of fodder for the cattle. The development of the settlers’ economy was also checked by the number of pastures being reduced, though the situation of the settlers’ villages remained stable. The 19th century was the period when the traditional nomadic economy of the Kalmyks underwent a crisis and was degrading, but at the same time it was the heyday of the economy of the sedentary population of the steppe, which is best illustrated by demographic data showing a decreasing birth rate and degradation of the population growth of the Kalmyks on the background of a steady growth of the sedentary population during the same period (Kolesnik, 1995, 87-127; Belousov, 1996, 25-35; 1998, 30-44; 1999, 41-540).

Of no less interest is the pattern of settlement of the peasants in the steppes. Despite the government efforts to regulate the settling of the steppe by the sedentary population, the decisive factor influencing the process was that of natural and geographical conditions and in particular the suitability of the place for agricultural and cattle breeding economy of the peasants and their sedentary life style. Thus, the map illustrating the spread of peasants’ settlements on the territory of Kalmyk uluses shows its strict regularity. A considerable number of them were concentrated on the Yergheny Highland, where in deep ravines there were small rivers and streams of fresh water or where underground fresh water was near the surface. Another concentration of peasants’ settlements can be found in the valleys of big steppe rivers – the Manich and Kuma and farther on along the coastline of the Caspian Sea and
on the islands.

At first villages were the main centers of the sedentary population growth but later a system of khutors began to dominate the settlement pattern which was required by increasing herds. The scarcity of life-supporting resources such as water and grass for cattle dictated the development of a disperse type of settlement with the population and cattle scattered on the great expanses of the steppe. This survey clearly shows that, despite unfavorable natural and climatic conditions, farming, with part of the agricultural product produced even for sale, as well as a sedentary lifestyle, are quite possible in dry Volga-Manich steppe. This is also supported by the data of Kalmyks’ agricultural activities such as hay mowing; cultivation of tobacco, millet and rye; and vegetable growing in the period of the Kalmyk Khanate until its dissolution in 1771 (Batmaev, 1982, 15-26).

Now let us turn to the second group of arguments we are discussing and begin with a general remark. The opinion that so far, despite large scope archeological excavations in the region, no settlements with traces of long time habitation (2) alongside with traces of farming (3) have been found in the Volga steppes requires further consideration.

Let us remind that V.P. Shilov, for example, pointed out “the absence of long term sedentary settlements and the presence of short term camps topographically associated with large sandy blowing-outs unsuitable for extensive farming at all” (Shilov, 1975, 8). He also stated “no positive archeological data of a considerable role of agriculture found in Lower Volga region up till the time of Srubnaya culture despite the systematic character of excavations on the territory” (Shilov, 1975, 81).

Numerous camps were found by V.D. Beletsky’s prospecting expedition in 1957 and by A.N. Melentiev’s one in Lower Zavolzhye, the left sandy bank at the lowest part of the Volga, in 1967. In fact, there are several score or maybe even hundreds of camps. N.Y Merpert mentions 130 and 50 of them; according to V.P. Shilov, there are over 200 of them (Shilov, 1981, 23-34). These are the statistical data which do not include several score of settlements mentioned by A.P. Kruglov and G.V. Podgaetsky where prospecting was undertaken by the members of Saratov Archive...
Commission. It was as early as 1935 that these authors wrote, “One of the greatest drawbacks in the study of the tribal society of the steppe zone of the Soviet Union is that the settlements of this period are seriously underinvestigated. The burial evidence as pertaining to phenomena of a super structural character gives a distorted picture of the reality; hence to get more accurate knowledge the evidence of camps is required which is unfortunately unknown, or to be more precise, still needs to be investigated as, generally speaking, the information about them as well as material to be raised from them are quite enough” (Kruglov, Podgaetsky, 1935, 27).

As far as the territory of modern Kalmykia in particular is concerned, in these Volga-Manich steppes a whole number of camps and sites of the Bronze Age were identified at different periods. Thus:

1) The route of the archeological-ethnographic expedition of 1929 led by P.S. Rikov went from south-east via the center of the Kalmyk Oblast to Sarpinsky lakes in the north-west. Kurgans and camps of different epochs were identified. A camp dating back to the Bronze Age and partly to the Neolithic Age was found 105 km from posyolok Yashkul near station 5. A significant amount of Catacomb culture ceramics on the dunes was registered by station 7 of the same direction which was identified by the author as “Bronze Age camp” (Rikov, 1931, 52-9).

2) In 1931 I.V. Sinitsin undertook quite elaborate prospecting of the coast line area of the Kalmyk Oblast. While publishing his results, he points out several sites. In the south-eastern part of the sandy area (to the north-east of the village of Zenzeli) there was a settlement which roughly covered an area of 400 m where among the finds were ceramics, stone grates, and circles of ash forming dark spots. According to the scholar, “the leading” category of ceramics is “typical of Catacomb kurgan burials”.

3) In Basinsky sands along the silt bank of the river, there was a Bronze Age settlement with a large amount of ceramics, large fragments, grain graters, fire layers up to 30 cm thick, and a large number of animal bones.

4) The traces of Bronze Age settlements were recorded on the dune closer to posyolok of Ulan-khol in Lagan - Beloye Lake direction and also on three sites in the north-eastern part of the lake. I. V. Sinitsin noted the settlement materials
“cannot be considered as completely spoilt” and also pointed out some differences in the location of Bronze Age settlements from that of Stone Age camps (Sinitsin, 1933, 90-101).

5) In the same area of the north-western Caspian coast, I.V. Sinitsin undertook another research expedition in 1946. A Bronze Age settlement 150 m in diameter was found by the village of Basy on the slope of a large Malinovsky hill. The ceramics had a likeness to that of kurgan burials. Prospecting shafts were dug on the site, but no regular cultural layer was found.

6) The site of Zenzeli contained Bronze Age and Neolithic ceramics. Most of it dates back to Catacomb culture of the late Bronze Age (Sinitsin, 1933, 134-144). G.I. Goretsky published the materials of Neolithic and Bronze Age camps located on the Manich bank (Goretsky, 1947, 535-540).

7) In 1966, N.D. Praslov undertook a prospecting expedition to identify Paleolithic sites. Alongside their main objective, the group discovered a number of places with Bronze Age ceramics. Microliths and Bronze Age ceramics were found on terrace-like spots to the east of Khar-Zukha ravine. In the place called Tsiganitsa 1, the pottery dating back to “the very end of Bronze Age” was opened separately from microliths (Praslov, 1971, 102-107). In 1976-1980, a number of prospecting expeditions were undertaken.

8) In 1976, Y.V Shneidshtein investigated 13 kurgans of Zakhanata burial on the western bank of Lake Khanata. Alongside these, she examined a settlement which was named by her Zakhanata. Four holes were made on the site which revealed the presence of two cultural layers. The lower layer (0.10-0.35 m) of light yellow sandy loam with inclusions of fragmented molded ceramics and bones was dated by the author to the Bronze Age while the upper dug layer (0.10-0.50 m) which contained pieces of earthenware of gray clay sometimes decorated by an ornament of waves and lines, as well as numerous fragments of iron objects, was dated back to the Middle Age. This was the first settlement with a preserved cultural layer found in the region under study (Shneidshtein, 1980, 182-3). Unfortunately, the information about the work on the site appeared only in a brief commentary in “Archeologichesky Otkritiya” while in the field account this part of the work is
absent (Shneidshtein, 1976).

In 1979, prospecting was undertaken in the south eastern regions of Kalmykia by the Pricaspian expedition of the Institute of Archeology (Academy of Sciences of the USSR) led by V.I. Markovin. Though finds of particular objects were quite numerous, the traces of settlements were not found by the expedition (Markovin, 1995, 20-52).

P.M. Koltsov also pointed out a number of sites containing the ceramics of the Bronze Age and of the next historical periods (Koltsov, 1982, 100-7).

9) He also found Ulan Tug-4 camp of the Eneolithic Age 2 km to the south of posyolok Narin Khuduk among the dispersed dunes. 50 m to the south there is a bed of a small lake which dries up from season to season. The set of finds from this site includes 89 items of chalk and dark gray flint and quartzite and 57 fragments of ceramics. Among most numerous tools are scrapes, there are also geometrical bushes, cutting tools, tools like spikes, spoke shaves, and an arrowhead of a triangular shape with a groove at the base. The types of arrows similar to this in shape and method of its working are familiar for Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age in the Caucasus, Stavropol region, and North Caspian area. They are also found in Yamnaya burials on the territory of Kalmykia. The ceramics of Ulan-Tug-4 camp are represented by small fragments of thick wall vessels. The paste contains plant ingredients and crushed shell. The color is light brown and yellowish. The ornament consists of marked lines and pressed-in holes. It is analogous to the materials of Samsonovskaya settlement and Repin Khutor in stage 2-3 which are dated back to Eneolithic time (Koltsov, 1985, 34-42, fig. 2, 39-51).

10) In 1989, N.M. Malov found a number of sites of the period under consideration, for example site Tavn-Gashun-3. To the left of the earth road Yashkul-Tavn-Gashun, 0.5 km to the north-west of the village on a high place behind the lake, 40 fragments of Bronze Age ceramics and a chip were found. At site Tavn-Gashun-5, located 12 km to the south-west of the village on the southern slope of a long sandy range with an area of 0.5 x 1 km, were, among numerous finds, ceramics, bones, and pieces of coal. The cultural layer was not found; the ceramics date back chiefly to the Catacomb culture. The next site is Saigachy, where materials were collected.
along the canal from an area of 1.5 x 1 km; the finds were located steadily on
the level of subsoil clay. Among them were a piece of a serpentine axe; a small
gray stone axe; two pestles; intact vessels of Yamnaya culture, Catacomb culture,
and Early Iron Age; seven fragments of one and the same Catacomb vessel; a piece
of a funnel of Catacomb culture; heaps of pieces of four Catacomb bulb vessels;
and about a hundred of fragments of Catacomb ceramics. The author made a con-
clusion that the site was once a Catacomb culture settlement (Malov, 1989).

11) In 1995, S.V. Sharaldinov undertook a prospecting in the area of a dry lake
bed to the south-east of Tavn-Gashun. He examined three sandy blowing-outs located
round the lake. Of interest for this paper is Blowing-out 2 with an area containing
finds of 350 x 500 m. Ceramics (261 pieces), 9 stones, and animal bones were
found. Among predominantly Bronze Age ceramics were fragments of large vessel
walls, fragments of loop like handles of Catacomb jugs, and fragments with modeled
ornament similar to that on bulb like vessels (Sharaldinov, 1995).

12) In 2010-2013, the excavations of the settlement of the Early Bronze Age
- Ergeninskoye were carried out. Geophysical research found that regular, partially
linear settlement structures can be traced on the magnetogram of the Ergeninskoye
settlement. Their size, repeatability, and quantity suggest that the traces of dwellings
were so reflected on the magnetogram. Traces of foci can be found in several places
by darker anomalies in the magnetic field. A cultural layer with a thickness of 80
cm, containing a large number of animal bones, fragments of stucco ceramics, and
bone products, was recorded on the settlement on an area of 400 sq. The bases
of four tandoor-type furnaces, made of sandstone stones calcined to pink, are open
meters away. Pillar pits of the walls of dwellings were found in three excavations.
Two radiocarbon dates of sheep bone samples from the lower layer of pit 4 and
10 were obtained, indicating the interval of the 29-27 century BC, and the dates
of the sheep bone sample from the upper layer of pit 8, indicating the interval of
26-25 centuries BC, which coincides with the period of the Yamnaya archaeological
culture and the beginning of the East Manych culture of the Middle Bronze Age
(Ochir-Goryaeva, Kekeev, Karnap-Bornheim, Fassbinder, 2011, pp. 81-85; Ochir-
Goryaeva, Kekeev, 2014, pp. 18-27). Thus, a number of monuments of the Bronze
Age were found in the Volga-Manych steppes.
It should be noted here that the materials of several score of camps have not been examined enough. In this context special attention calls the fact that there are traces of a cultural layer in Lower Volga area both on the left and right banks of the river. Thus, V.V. Plakhov found a Bronze Age settlement of Bish-Chokho with a 9 cm cultural layer which had fragments of Yamnaya culture vessels, bronze Maikop culture javelins, a heap of pieces of a bulb like vessel, and the base (foot) of an incense-burner (Plakhov, 1998, 7). The expeditions in Saratov oblast resulted in finding a powerful layer of Catacomb sites (Malov, Filipchenko, 1995, 52-61). There are burial sites and settlements among them, too. The Catacomb ceramics were found in the cultural settlements of six sites on the right bank of the Volga such as Khlopkovskoye, Alexeyevskoye, Akhmat-Andriyanovskoye, Utyos Stepana Razina, and Ternovka. In the same area there are settlements with Catacomb materials such as Starya Yablonovka, Yelansky Ruchey, Sosnovka-1, Martishkino, Sestrenki. The multilayer site of Urakov Bugor, which is 30 km to the south east of Kamishin on the right bank of the Volga, in its upper humus layer of 20-60 cm contained fragments with a string-like ornamentation dating to the Middle Bronze period of Catacomb or Yamnaya time (Dryomov, 2001, 125). On the left bank of the Volga, there are dune camps of Praporshky Bugor and Berezovka. The ceramics found on the sites Staritsa on the river Altata (the left stream of Bolshoi Uzen’), Osinovoye on the river Bolshoi Karaman was identified by the authors as Catacomb one with a cylinder ornament. There are another three sites with Catacomb ceramics such as Peredovoye (the upper layer) on the river Bolshoi Uzen’, Miloradovka-1 in Upper Bolshoi Uzen’ and multilayered Kumiska on the river Torgun (Yudin et al., 1996, 126-7).

To the east, in South Urals area in the Middle Age layer of Turganiksky site and on a scattered site on the dunes by the village of Privolnoye, grooved flint arrow heads were found. Triangular arrowheads with dropped pins and a groove at their base are typical of Catacomb culture (Khalyapin, 1998, 77-9).

These facts show that in the Middle Bronze Age the population of Lower Volga (and the Volga-Manich steppe as its part) had more or less stationary settlements. That is why it is worth examining thoroughly the sites in the south of the right bank of the Volga mentioned above which were identified as temporary ones. None
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of the publications has produced enough facts to prove their ‘temporary” or “seasonal” character of exploitation. They may turn out to be the remains of small stationary cattle breeding settlements like peasants’ khutors in the steppe with the population consisting of 5-7 homesteads which left a too thin, ephemeral cultural layer for their small size and cattle breeding character of their economy. Thus, they need to be further investigated both in terms of their topographic and geographic aspect and of their archeological aspect.

As has been shown above, there have been few special and professional prospecting expeditions investigating settlements in particular as compared with large scope excavations of the kurgans. It is no wonder then that the settlements are still to be found. Besides, it seems quite plausible that the peasants’ farmsteads like those mentioned were founded on the ancient population’s settlement sites as there are not many places in the steppe good for settling down. At any rate it is necessary to undertake a study of the specific features of archeologization of settlements under the steppe conditions. So far, two factors associated with specific steppe conditions have not been taken into consideration in all the previous research.

First, as the Kalmyk steppe settlers’ example shows, in preindustrial epochs the disperse type of settlement in the steppe with the population scattered in small villages or the so called khutors made up of several homesteads should be recognized as the most optimal one for a shortage of life supporting resources (grass and water). This type of settlement obviously could not contribute to the formation of a solid cultural layer.

Second, for a thin layer of vegetation the humus restoration process in the steppe is much slower than in the forest zone. It requires a considerably longer period of time for the grass in the steppe to cover formerly inhabited places while the dry winds which are frequent in the steppes both in winter and summer blowing for weeks cannot but scatter away traces of the cultural layer. Moreover, too thin a layer of humus (5-7 cm) does not contribute to preserving the components of the cultural layer in the soil either. Therefore, the thin layer of humus, slow process of its restoration, and year round wind erosion are the factors influencing directly the process of formation and preservation of the cultural layer in the soil of the steppe. This is the reason why it is necessary to work out a different field methodology
and other criteria for the interpretation of the materials of the steppe settlements as compared with other geographical zones with intensive life supporting resources.

It is also worth taking into consideration the fact that the settlements of other epochs in the region in question are mostly represented by scattered sites. Thus, among Mesolithic sites there is none with a cultural layer. According to P.M. Koltsov, there are about 40 Neolithic sites and only three of them had a cultural layer (Djanggar, Tu-Buzgu-Khuduk 1, Tu-Buzgu-Khuduk 2) (Koltsov, 1988, 4, 12-14). This fact, however, is not seen as the evidence of the nomadic lifestyle of the Neolithic population. There is no question of the steppe landscape in Mesolithic and Neolithic epochs either. The scattered character of the sites in the steppes, their small size, and absence of the cultural layer may be justified not only by the form of life style of the early population but also by the specific characteristics of preservation of the cultural traces of habitation in the steppes.

The mechanical application of ideas of “classical” settlement archeology based on the data of other geographical zones to those of the steppe zone, as well as little attention paid to its climatic and soil peculiarities, resulted in a faulty methodology of underestimating a score of sites and development of concepts and theories and fundamental treatises on the basis of a narrow scope of sources and data.

At this point it is worth considering in some detail the term “open steppes”. F. Hanchar was the first to introduce the term “open steppes” stretching, according to him, from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea (Hanchar, 1955, 88-123). It may be presumed from the context that F. Hanchar called these “open steppes” in contrast to the western part of East European steppes (Carpathian Danube), as they are not bordered by mountains in the north. However, it seems in Russian archeological literature the term is used with other implications. The term “open steppes” cannot be found in any of the geographical reference books. In logical terms it has the same meaning as, for example, “mountainous mountains” or “woody forests”. It may still be applied, in my opinion, to the sea but not referring to the steppe. If the term “open steppes” may have the implication of the steppes without water then consequently the nomads are classified by archeologists as a special kind people with no need in water. According to archeologists’ point of view, only nomads live in “the open steppes” where nobody else can survive for lack of water.
Thus, it should be cleared up what the steppes are “open” to and how this “openness” is manifested. It seems for the steppe dwellers, whether nomadic or not, such an idea is of no relevance. Everything depends on the time of the year, the amount of rainfall, and knowledge of the geography of the place. There is a special place in the steppe which is called “urochishe” which is known for a well dug up here, or it is a place where it is sure to find water digging up a small well. Nomads used to move from one of these places to another to supply water for themselves and their herds which were by no means small. The steppe is very different from a sea or an ocean where there are pieces of land under masses of water and it does not rain or snow “earth”. In other words, if there is a small settlement of several homesteads in the steppes, the water for their needs can be found almost everywhere in the steppes. This is clearly shown by “The Water Map of Kalmyk Lands of Astrakhanskaya Government Drawn by a Hydrotechnician of the Department for State Property M. Gavrilov in 1909” (Ochir-Goryaeva, 2002, Supplement 1). It clearly shows that the territory of Yergheni Highland and western part of the Kuma-Manich hollow are covered by a network of small rivers located in ravines. The whole of the Caspian coast lowland in its northern part is covered by a set of Sarpinsky lakes while everywhere on the rest of the territory there are wooden srubny wells and khuduks (dug up wells). Therefore, there is nothing supernatural in the fact that Bronze Age settlements are located in the places which seem to archeologists “open”. Quite different are large settlements of hundreds of homesteads or towns, but this is not relevant for the time of Bronze Age.

Now let us turn to group 3 of arguments concerning the archeological evidence of a nomadic way of life based on burial rite data. The argument supporting the idea that kurgans were built in the steppes only by the nomadic tribes to make it easy for them to find their relatives’ graves can be refuted very simply. Kurgan burials are also found with many sedentary tribes and peoples, and old Russian kurgans are a good example of this. Besides, the steppe dwellers are good at orientation in the steppe without any kurgans and they do not need to be nomadic for that matter. This is, however, true for any population in their habitual environment (forest people for the forest and mountain dwellers for the mountains).

The presence of transport means such as carts in the graves is considered to be
an important piece of evidence supporting the idea of the mobile character of Bronze Age population. However it should be noted that this is characteristic of the whole epoch in question. Carts and wheels are found on an extensive territory in the Bronze Age, including regions of sedentary cultures such as Zakavkazye (Tran Caucasus), Asia Minor, China, and Central and Western Europe (Häusler, 1981, 581-647, 1984, 629-682, Izbitser, 1993, Pare, 1992, 12-16, fig.19). There are hundreds of Eneolithic and Bronze Age sites containing transport means. Thus, according to Y. Izbitser, there are 248 burials with one or more carts in the East Eurasian steppes on the territory of the former Soviet Union (Izbitser, 1993, 2) while they are found much less frequently in truly nomadic archeological cultures. According to F. Balonov, in the Eurasian steppes there are 17 burials of Scythian time with fragments of carts and there is one whole cart in the fifth Paziriksky kurgan; 13 Sarmatian burials also contain cart pieces (Balonov, 1996, 14, 21). Even such a brief survey shows that the presence of transport means in burials is only a feature characteristic of the burial rite but not of the lifestyle of the deceased.

The same kind of reasoning can be applied to the argument based on the animal bones in the graves. In her review of V.P. Shilov’s paper, Y. Kuzmina, for instance, pointed out the methodological drawback of using the data pertaining to the animal bones in the graves (Kuzmina, 1977, 261-265). The same criticism was made by Y. Rassamakin (Rassamakin, 1999, 131). As early as 1935, A.P. Kruglov and V.G. Podgaetsky called attention to the mistake often made when the reconstruction of the herd composition was based on the remains of burial feast or burial rite food in the graves. The same can be clearly illustrated by the following ethnographic piece of evidence. If we take the nearest example, the Kalmyks divide all their cattle into animals of warm air and those of cold air, and in all their ritual ceremonies only beasts of warm air (sheep and horses) are sacrificed and almost never the big cattle are used for the purpose, though traditionally the Kalmyks kept all the kinds of cattle mentioned. V.P Shilov presented tables according to which the maximum content of animal bones in Bronze age burials is 22-27% (Shilov, 1975, 63, table 1, 169-178, tables I-IV). Burials containing the so-called “fortune telling” sheep blade bone specially processed for the purpose, as well as specially processed tibial sheep bones and its small bones (alchiki), were also taken into consideration in the
calculations. Though these do not belong to remains of a burial feast, they presumably show the herd composition as well.

At this point, it is interesting to compare these facts with the data of the burial rite of true nomads whose lifestyle is known from written sources. The methodology of this approach cannot be questioned, as in both cases the same category of sources, that is burials, are taken into consideration. According to A.S. Skripkin, in early Sarmatian time (3-1 cc BC) burials with sheep bones made up 39% in Lower Volga area and 50.1% in South Urals (Skripkin, 1997, 184). According to my data, only 21.2% of the burials of Scythian time in South Urals do not contain animal bones. In the Lower Volga area, the figure is somewhat higher (56.3%), but still it shows that in the Scythian period the deceased were “provided” with meat as part of burial food two times more often than in the Bronze Age (Ochir-Goryaeva, 2000, 202, fig. 2, 27, 28, 29). Among these sheep bones are found in 28.4% of burials of Lower Volga and in 58% of those in South Urals; horse bones are found in 3% burials of Lower Volga and 40% in South Urals. Besides, it should be noted that in a number of burials of early nomads the bones of different animals can be found at once. According to B. Zhelezchikov, in 4-1 cc BC such burials made up 15.1% of the total number of early Sarmatian ones (Zhelezchikov, 1997, 84). It is notable that V.A. Shnirelman pointed out that “while many archeologists call the representatives of Yamnaya culture nomads, the ethnographers studying nomadism have been questioning this opinion for a long time” (Shnirelman, 1988, 42).

It should be also noted here that there is some indirect evidence which is additional but still may point at the direction on which the research should be focused. For example, this is a great variety of vessels dating back to Catacomb culture. In one grave there may be seven or eight vessels used, judging by their shape, size, and ornaments, for different purposes. Bronze Age ceramics differs from that of nomadic as they are more skillfully made; its ornaments are more elaborate and have a variety of shapes. It is worth examining, for example, Catacomb culture incense-burners, to illustrate my point. The quality of baking and paste of Bronze Age ceramics is obviously superior to that of pottery of nomadic Scythian-Sarmatian and Middle Age periods. Of interest are also vessels of a comparatively large size from Bronze Age burials. Large vessels are familiar as they are found in nomads’ burials as well.
These are first of all high (over half a meter) gray clay Sarmatian jugs. Bronze Age vessels are not equal to them in firmness, as Sarmatian jugs were import items made of thick clay. Besides, the shape of the latter (they are narrow and tall) also contributed to their firmness. The vessels often found in Catacomb culture burials are large, “bulb like”, wide (over 50 cm in diameter) and low, made of usual clay used for other modeled vessels. According to their characteristics (flat and wide in shape; their paste composition), these vessels are least portable. The same comment can be made about the so-called “braziers” from walls of large and mellow vessels.

In this aspect of importance are also stone pestles from Bronze Age kurgans, bulls’ skulls put on the bones of four legs disembodied at the knee. These finds are not infrequent and are found mostly on the altars in kurgan mounds. The altars are usually made of bulls’ skulls put on leg bones cut at the knee with hooves. Sometimes the skulls are put in rows. Besides, skulls and leg bones tail bones are also found. These bone remains are reconstructed as the burial of a bull’s head with its hide and four leg bones that is as a symbolic substitute of a whole bull sacrificed.

In kurgan 8 of Elistinsky grave complex, a covered cart was found. Inside the cart, there were two large folded mats of rough and fine work, a bronze knife, and a bone tube with thoroughly polished ends. This burial in a cart belongs to the category of symbolic burials, or cenotaphs. The authors of the excavations link this burial with the altar in the kurgan mound, as there is an altar which covered an area of almost 2 m in diameter in the south-western sector of the kurgan nearer to its center. It consisted of bones of seven bulls: their skulls and leg bones cut at the knee with hooves put under the skulls.

In grave 9 of kurgan 5 of Elistinsky grave complex, a four wheeled cart without a cover was found. The cart filled the whole room of an entrance pit. The cart contained an altar consisting of two bulls’ bones with their legs cut at the knee put together with the skulls. Beside the bones and on the bones, there were four sandstone tiles, the so-called straighters of arrow wooden parts, a clay vessel with two handles, a clay funnel, a stone tile-pestle, and a stone pestle (Sinitsin, Erdniev, 1971).

Many stone pestles have a phallic shape (Sinitsin, 1978, 16. table 48, 9-10). All
of this may be evidence of their religious use and of a link of stone pestles with developed traditions of an agricultural idea of fertility. Moreover, beside these the Bronze Age kurgans contain also real millstones and large grain graters. The nomads also used millstones in their everyday life for crushing cereals and making flour, but they were purely pragmatic; their shapes were simple and functional. Of importance is also the sacral role of big cattle in the altars of the Bronze Age. The cattle, least mobile in comparison with sheep, horses, and camels, never played a dominant role either in the nomadic economy or in the spiritual culture and religious practice of nomads. There is an explanation to this made by the Kalmyks as, according to them, the sheep and horses have “a warm air” (khalun kiita) while the goat and cattle have “a cold air” (kiitn kiita). That is why only animals of warm air were normally used as a sacrifice. There is another piece of indirect evidence. Thus, as has been mentioned above, according to Y.V. Tsutskin, there are 1850 Bronze Age burials (Yamnaya, Catacomb cultures), opened in the period between 1929 and 1979, as well as 672 early Iron Age and Middle Age burials (Scythian, Sarmatian, early and late (Gold Horde) Middle Age periods). The obvious statistical gap attracts the attention at once. In this summing up, 134 Srubnaya culture burials are not taken into consideration for a more correct estimation. Thus, the nomads’ burials are 2.75 times fewer than those of the Bronze Age. In terms of the conventional chronology and dating system, the Bronze Age in this region lasted from the 30th c. to the 17th c. and covered about 13 centuries, while the time space of the nomads’ burials is five centuries longer and lasted from the 5th c. BC to the 13th c. AD. Let us consider the data given by Y.V. Tsutskin in his table as a random count. Taking into consideration the fact that these are the data collected during 24 out of 45 seasons of field work which took place, in terms of elementary statistics this count may be considered quite representative. Then the given results may reflect the objective reality or general entity, using the statistical terminology.

Thus, if we assume that the number of burials has something to do with the number of people who lived at the time, then it follows that the population of early and middle Bronze Age buried in the Volga steppes exceeded that of the nomads’ epoch which lasted 5 centuries longer. V.P. Shilov also pointed out that according to his tables “over half of the burials investigated far out in the steppe date back to Eneolithic
and Bronze time (62%) and only 38% were of Savromatian-Sarmatian and late nomadic tribes (Shilov, 1975a, 8, table 2). These data correspond with my idea that the nomads used both banks of the Volga interchangeably for their seasonal migrations (Ochir-Goryaeva, 2000, 152-153). Thus, the data under consideration may be interpreted not only as a piece of indirect evidence showing that the nomads’ sites were arranged on a larger territory but also that the nomads in the Volga steppes were always less numerous. If we try to get at some general conclusions, then it should be noted that according to the count in question, 1850 Bronze Age burials were left during 13 centuries while 672 – in 18 centuries’ time. This means for each Bronze Age century we have 143.3 burials and 37.3 burials – for each century of the nomads’ epoch and that there were 3.8 times more kurgan burials during one and the same period of time of the Bronze Age.

Taking into consideration the arbitrariness of these calculations (as archeological dating may fluctuate to an earlier or later time, as well as there are other unknown factors and other forms of treating the deceased, etc), the results have to be considered as indirect adding to the general picture. Anyway, this statistical “play with figures” shows that in accordance with the counting made, in the Bronze Age the territory under study had obviously a density of population exceeding that of the nomads’ epoch, while its size remained the same.

This conclusion, in combination with geographic peculiarities in the arrangement of the sites described above, can be interpreted as an indirect piece of evidence showing the difference of the economic and cultural types of the societies in question. The abundance and density of burial complexes may be interpreted as indirect evidence of the stability in the lifestyle of the Bronze Age population in the Volga-Manich steppes throughout their long history.

The smaller number of the nomads’ burial sites shows that they needed much greater expanses than the Bronze Age population to have a successful economy.

The statement about the absence of Srubnaya culture burials in “the dry steppes of Kalmykia” was already refuted by L. Klein (Klein, 1980, 31). Thus, Srubnaya culture burials are found not only in the regions close to the Volga but also far out in the south of Yergheninsky Highland, for example in the Khar Zukha grave...
Some Controversial Problems in the Study of Bronze Age Sites in the Volga-Manich Steppes

complex (Ochir-Goryaeva, 1991). The summary of burials excavated on the territory of Kalmykia in the period of 1929-1979 contains the information about 134 Srubnaya culture burials (Tsutskin, 1985, 17, table 1). They are also found farther to the south in Stavropol region and North Caucasus (Derzhavin, 1991; Nagler, 1995).

Now the situation with swine bones needs to be considered. Traditionally, in archeology, it is commonly accepted that swine bones are direct evidence of a sedentary lifestyle. However, this opinion results from research dealing with the industrial or even modern epoch, while in early and preindustrial epochs raising pigs was not associated with the lifestyle of the population but first and foremost with natural conditions. Of importance in this respect was an opportunity to put them partly or completely at grass. For example, in the regions with oak forests such conditions were available (Cate, 1972). Moreover, on the islands of the Pacific Ocean, pig-breeding societies migrated with their herds in search of fodder. Thus, in theory nomadic lifestyle is possible in combination with pig breeding (according to Neubert Beneke, a paleozoologist; the opinion expressed in a conversation). If we take the example of the above mentioned peasants resettled to the steppe, they had in fact one pig per a farmstead, which is 58 times fewer as compared with the sheep they kept and 137 times fewer than cattle. These are the data of 1917 pertaining to the village of Bislyurtla where they kept 269 swine per 229 cattle breeding farms, while at khutors they did not keep pigs at all (Belousov, 1998, 44; Belousov, 1992, 168-9).

Now let us briefly consider the question of a more progressive and prestigious character of nomadic economy than complex farming and breeding economy which was criticized by L. Klein. As the survey of the resettled peasants’ economic activities has shown, the situation is quite the opposite. In a zone of risky farming, under the conditions when laying-in enough hay for winter is hard for scarcity of grass, it is the combination of winter pasturing with temporary keeping of cattle in stalls, as well as gardening, vegetable growing, and farming, that shows this complex kind of economy is characterized by greater stability which ensures its further development.

As the archeological and historical data show, the economic and ecological optimal character of the Eurasian nomadic cattle breeding directly depends on the territory
available for the nomads and their economic environment. The nomadic economy of the Kalmyks in the 17th-20th cc can vividly illustrate the point. The Kalmyks had an economically and ecologically optimal cattle breeding economy only during a definite period of their history, that is from the time of their arrival in the southern Russian steppes up to the dissolution of the Kalmyk Khanate. During that period, they used both banks of the Volga for their seasonal migrations (the left bank was used in summers and the right one was for winter pasturing). After the departure of the majority of the Kalmyks in 1771 and dissolution of the Kalmyk Khanate, the ban to travel on the left bank of the Volga, and loss of best land pastures during the peasants’ colonization of the steppe following these, the nomadic cattle breeding of the Kalmyks was undermined and no longer supported the demographic growth of the population and development of the traditional culture and lifestyle (Dubrova, 1998, Kolesnik, 1995, Djimbinov, 1960, Ustyugov, 1960, Ochir-Goryaeva, 1999, 85-7).

Considering the progressive character of Eurasian nomadic cattle breeding in general, it may be noted that it is progressive as an achievement resulting in a narrow economic specialization which provided survival and development under the critical conditions but only for a definite historical period, that is from early Iron Age to Middle Age. The new time period with industrialization and technological progress advancing on the nomads’ territory and dominating them by their economic advantages is the period when the nomadic economy and societies supported by it were in crisis (Khazanov, 1975, 264-274).

Thus, as this survey has shown, the first group of arguments supporting the idea of the impossibility of a sedentary lifestyle and farming in the steppes is disproved by the example of the peasant settlers. The second group of arguments requires further consideration on the basis of new methodological approaches. The third group of arguments serves to characterize first of all the specific features of ritual rite and cannot be relied on as direct evidence for identifying the type of economy and lifestyle of the population who left these sites.

The question of the origin of nomadic cattle breeding and its history is a more complex and largely theoretical question. It requires the involvement of not only archaeological sources, but also geographical, sociological, historical, etc. (Schölz,
1995; Khazanov, 1975, p. 275). A number of researchers consider the origin of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes from wandering forest hunters more likely (Lattimore, 1988, p. 327-328; Weinstein, 1991, pp. 283-290). One should not lose sight of the fact, pointed out by V. Shnirelman, that according to Chinese sources nomadism has been recorded only since the middle of the 1st millennium BC, as well as the fact that in the X–XII centuries, part of the Mongols lived in the forest and became nomadic pastoralists literally before the empire of Genghis Khan (Vladimirtsov, 1934, p. 34; Markov, 1976, p. 30).

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