

FAREWELL TO THE MARAUDING NOMAD

Nomads and Networks. The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan. Eds. Sören Stark and Karen S. Rubinson with Zainolla S. Samashev and Jennifer Y. Chi. Including contributions by Nursan Alimbai, Nikolay A. Bokovenko, Claudia Chang, Bryan K. Hanks, Sagynbay Myrgabayev, Karen S. Rubinson, Zainolla S. Samashev, Sören Stark, and Abdesh T. Toleubaev. New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World and New York University; Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. 195 pp. ISBN 978-00691-15480-0.

Steppenkrieger. Reiternomaden des 7.-14. Jahrhunderts aus der Mongolei. Ein Ausstellung im LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn. Ed. Jan Bemann. Bonn: LVR-LandesMuseum; Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2010. 416 pp. ISBN 978-3-86312-011-5.

We can't seem to get enough of "nomad archaeology" these days, which, I think, is a good thing. Perhaps eventually public misperceptions of the role of nomads in history will catch up to the increasingly sophisticated understanding of pastoral cultures which has been changing our ideas about the broader patterns of interactions across Eurasia. The idea first fostered in early Greek and Chinese texts about rapacious marauders who were the antithesis of everything sedentary and "civilized" has finally been supplanted by an ever more sophisticated understanding of social and economic complexity and the nature of steppe-based polities. The two very different exhibitions enshrined in these volumes contribute in important ways to publicizing the recent discoveries which are helping to revise old paradigms.

Nomads and Networks, which opened at the New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, has now moved to the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., through to mid-November of this year. Unfortunately, I have not yet seen the exhibition itself. The *Steppe Warriors (Steppenkrieger)* exhibition which opened in Bonn is now in Amsterdam at the Allard Pierson Museum (through January 13, 2013) and will then be at the Kelten Römer Museum Manching from May through November. My comments on *Steppenkrieger* are based in part on seeing the exhibition and participating in the accompanying symposium, "The Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium AD. Empires, Cities, Nomads and Farmers," whose papers will be published.

Even though *Nomads and Networks* is being welcomed as presenting new material from Kazakhstan, in fact it was preceded in 2006-7 by a more modest exhibition in San Diego and Houston that included material from the same excavations. Its catalogue (*Of Gold and Grass: Nomads of Kazakhstan*) anticipated ideas which now have been developed more fully in the essays in *Nomads and Networks*. One of the virtues of the new exhibition is its display of objects which have now been fully cleaned and restored and had not been available in 2006. Many of the objects are "repetitive" – thus, 15 carved horn plaques with facing griffins from Berel Kurgan 36, multiple examples of carved horn bars from bridles, a dozen examples each of similar arrowheads, several three-legged trays of similar design. While there are a few gold plaques, some with inlay and granulation, unlike in the typical exhibitions of "art of the Scythians," they do not occupy center stage. More than half of the exhibition is material from the Berel kurgans. *Of Gold and Grass* included artifacts of modern pastoral culture in Kazakhstan, whereas the focus of *Nomads and Networks* is on the Iron Age in, roughly, the first millennium BCE.

The essays in *Nomads and Networks* have been aimed, appropriately, for a general audience. Nikolay Bokovenko and Zainolla Samashev provide some context on "The Roots of Iron Age Pastoral Nomadic Culture," focusing in particular on the important excavations of the burials at Arzhan I and II, sites which "share characteristics with those at Berel: the deceased, buried under mounds, are accompanied both by rich grave goods and often by many horses, which are sometimes highly ornamented..." (p. 28).

Samashev then describes the Berel excavations, his essay illustrated by some good photographs and drawings. The material culture embodied in these elite burials certainly speaks to a range of important economic activities in which non-elite groups must have been involved, but there is curiously little here in support of some of the broader conclusions about social organization and nothing much about the cultures of everyday life. Abdesh Toleubaev's essay on the excavations of Kurgan 3 at Shlikhty focuses on the gold, and reaches a still somewhat tentative conclusion that it was mined in the Shlikhty valley. Of course we have seen plenty of other examples of gold from nomad elite tombs. What is of perhaps greater interest here is the rare find of painted imagery on wood. Sagynbay Myrgabayev's essay on rock art, illustrated with some good photos and drawings of material that for obvious reasons could not be exhibited in New York, is of interest for contextualizing "animal style" art and suggesting some of the distinctive features of it found at sites in Kazakhstan. One wonders, of course, about his basis for the dating of the imagery.

The book arguably becomes much more stimulating in the essays by Rubinson (on burial practices and social roles), Hanks (on mounted warfare), Stark (on network connections to "the outside world") and Chang (on cycles of mobility and sedentism). All of these draw upon some of the newer interpretive strategies which are contributing to our understanding of nomad societies but are not much reflected in the essays by the Kazakh archaeologists. Rubinson's essay poses interesting questions about why the burials at Berel and in the Pazyryk tombs across the northern borders in the Altai contain wooden structures that replicated or at least drew upon the materials from ones used in daily life. One may also speculate on the question of what the "non-verbal communication" of complex imagery and trappings (for horses) may tell us about the ideas of the elites in those societies. Rubinson largely leaves the answers for further study. Hanks reviews the still disputed evidence about early horse domestication, which led to the development of mounted warfare and it in turn to sociopolitical change, enabling successful practitioners to consolidate and extend political power over larger areas and command resources in ways that had not been possible earlier.

In a sense, the key essay here is that by Sören Stark, since he addresses specifically the subject of what the material evidence reveals about long-distance networks. Much here is not really new – for example, we have known for a long time about the Chinese and likely "Achaemenid" connections of those buried in the Pazyryk kurgans in the Altai. One might have thought he would cite in his supporting evidence the new analysis of textile dyes, which takes us beyond

a discussion of motifs in proving that even some of the felts may have been imported. Stark reminds us of how important were the Wusun in the introduction of Chinese motifs in Central Asia, a fact which is sometimes obscured by the focus on the Xiongnu in discussions of the origins of the "Silk Roads." Among the more intriguing ideas here (perhaps less well known) is the suggestion some have made recently about possible Indian sources of material found in the Pazyryk burials, the new evidence coming from the application of technologically sophisticated analysis which was not available at the time of many of the earlier excavations. He does a particularly good job of outlining the various mechanisms by which prestige goods could have come to the northern nomads, but is also careful to point out the ways that objects evidently of local manufacture drew upon but did not simply replicate the imports. The illustrations here enable us to compare visually the material from Kazakhstan with the analogous objects from outside its borders.

Claudia Chang's essay, focusing on the excavations at Talgar in which she has participated, fills in some of the gaps left in the earlier discussion of the elite burials and takes us well beyond most of what is in the exhibition. For the remains at Talgar (including domesticated animal bones and domesticated cereals) really give some substance to ideas about socio-economic complexity. She invokes David Sneath's views about "headless states" as a way to relate such evidence to the emergence of larger political units. Here is the reverse side of the coin on which Stark imprinted the evidence about long-distance connections, for Chang's emphasis is on regional and local economies that maximized the resource potential of the alluvial fans on the north slopes of the Tian Shan. Hers is the essay that arguably is the most far-reaching in its promise for our learning more about this world of what were really semi-nomadic societies of some complexity.

The concluding essay in the volume, by Nursan Alimbaev, bringing the discussion of Central Asian nomads down to the present, is anticlimactic, if suggestive of ways that ethnographic research may support hypotheses about such societies in earlier centuries. This epilogue moves us rather far from any serious consideration of the excavation material from the Iron Age.

One wonders whether in Germany there are higher expectations of the audience for museum exhibitions than in the United States. There is a certain density to the presentation in *Steppenkrieger* which would make it less appealing to a general audience than *Nomads and Networks*. Yet this is easily explained (and justified) by the specific nature of the exhibition, which grew out

of close Mongolian–German archaeological collaboration, with the Germans offering to do the conservation work for some remarkable recent finds. While not highly technical, the book nonetheless represents a substantial report on the excavations themselves, the restoration work and the related reconstructions of some of the objects. It would be tempting to say that the title of the book and its cover illustration of an armored Turkic warrior drawing his bow merely reinforce our old stereotypes about nomads. But that is hardly the purpose here. What is really significant is the window this recently discovered material opens on what appear to have been ordinary members of nomadic societies in Mongolia from the Türk Empire (7th century) to the Mongol Empire (14th century).

The opening essays provide context, starting with Peter Golden’s impressively compressed overview of Central Asian history from the 6th to the 11th centuries, based primarily on the evidence from the written sources. I can think of no other scholar who could pull off this feat. Those who would wish to place the specific objects and excavations featured in the rest of the book in the broadest chronological context, will find in an appendix an extensive chronological table encompassing everything from Europe to China.

The essay in the book which confronts most directly the stereotypical views of nomads as barbarians is that by Johannes Gießauf, exploring the outside perceptions regarding the supposed antithesis between nomads and sedentary civilization. I assume that to a large extent his account summarizes what is in his book-length *Barbaren – Monster – Gottesgeisseln. Steppennomaden im europäischen Spiegel der Spätantike*

Fig. 1. Felt deel. Cave burial at Dugui Tsakhir, Baiantsagaan sum, Baiankhongor aimag, Khitan period (late 10th–early 11th centuries).



Fig. 2. Mounted archer. Iran, early 15th century. Dietz A fol. 72, S.13

und des Mittelalters (Graz, 2006), though here he does consider as well the perspective of the Chinese annals.

In contrast to Bryan Hanks’ discussion of horses in *Nomads and Networks*, which is concerned with the archaeological evidence, here Veronica Veit focuses on the cultural perceptions of those in Mongolia for whom horses became an essential part of their lives. She includes in her purview literature and folk tradition, and concludes with a few comments regarding the *Morin khuur*, the horsehead fiddle, which segues into the specific discussion of the objects on which the exhibition and the rest of the book focus.

Annemarie Stauffer’s essay on equestrians’ clothing shows how the recent finds from Mongolia (Fig. 1) illustrate a broader pattern of the development of clothes suitable for horsemen which can be documented from a variety of other sources spread across Eurasia. In particular, some of the finds from tombs in the Caucasus, from excavations in the Tarim

Basin and Noyon uul in Mongolia illustrate basic types of coats or kaftans, trousers and boots which are analogous to the objects in the exhibition. One could easily find other analogies (e.g., the clothes of the Bactrian/Yuezhi discussed by Sergey Yatsenko in this issue of *The Silk Road*).

While the illustrations of Middle Eastern paintings certainly complement the rest of the exhibition, in that they depict horsemen, their clothing and their equipment, in some ways the exhibit’s nice selection of the famous miniatures from the Dietz Collection now in Berlin is the odd man out (Fig. 2). Christoph Rauch’s essay on the pictures provides a

conventional overview of the collection's history and some comments on the milieu in which the paintings were produced. The images include illustrations presumably prepared in the Ilkhand workshop of Rashid al-Din for his *World History*, as well as some later ones from the Timurid period. I personally was thrilled at my first viewing of these drawings in the flesh, having seen so many reproduced over the years in exhibit catalogues and histories of Islamic art. My appreciation was enhanced when I was told this may well be the last time they are allowed out on tour, presumably because overexposure is now threatening their effective preservation.

While removed by some centuries from the earliest objects in the exhibition, the evidence from Xiongnu burials of the 2nd century BCE through first century CE is extremely important for documenting the development of a capacity for mounted warfare in the steppe. Ursula Brosseder and Bryan Miller, who have done important work in recent Xiongnu archaeology, effectively highlight the contributions of the Xiongnu, both with regard to riding and harness and with regard to weaponry, where the bows, arrows and quivers all preview the ones so remarkably preserved in the later burials.

To provide the immediate setting for the oldest objects in the exhibiton, Gleb Kubarev summarizes what we currently know about the archaeology of early Türks, primarily from regions outside the borders of today's Mongolia. Much of this material presumably summarizes that in his book on the culture of the early Türks published in Novosibirsk in 2005. He illustrates burials of humans accompanied into the afterlife by the horses that were sacrificed and buried with them, comments briefly on ornament, belt plaques, armor, evidence of broader cultural and trade connections, and finally stone sculpture and petroglyphs. His focus then complements the following essay by Tsagaan Törbat and Tserendorj Odbaatar on excavations of Türk period graves in Mongolia, which suggests that, despite some statements to the contrary, quite a bit

has been done to document the Türk period material there, and not just for the monumental complexes with the famous "Orkhon inscriptions" at Khöshöö Tsaidam in the Orkhon valley.

Arguably the most striking of all the objects illustrated in the exhibition is the largely well-preserved harp found in the Türk period cave burial at Zhargalant (Fig. 3).¹ Susanna Schulz explains clearly why it is a harp, analogous to the angle harps known from Middle Eastern and Chinese sources. Her reconstruction of the instrument as it might originally have appeared is displayed in the exhibition alongside original (Fig. 4). Its decoration is especially noteworthy – at the end of the "neck" is a carved horse head (anticipating the horse head on the *Morin khuur*). Carved into the body of the instrument are scenes of an animal hunt, whose analogies to depictions in petroglyphs are explored here in a separate essay by Esther Jacobson-Tepfer. Of even greater interest are the old Turkic runic inscriptions whose possible interpretation (still rather unclear) is discussed by Peter Zieme. While the date of the harp is imprecise, it would seem to be from the same period as the Orkhon inscriptions (ca. 8th century), possibly even earlier, and in any event, it is the oldest musical instrument yet found in Mongolia. Among the many attractive illustrations that enhance our imagination about the contexts for the archaeological finds is Dmitrii Pozdniakov's painting showing the harp being played by its owner, sitting on the grass in front of his grazing horse (pp. 154-55).

Since the exhibition came about largely because the objects in it had been sent to Germany for restoration and conservation, it is appropriate to learn here a bit about the technical challenges involved, summarized effectively by Holger Becker and Regina Klee. In general, the preservation of both the organic material and the metalwork was quite remarkable, thanks to its being protected from the elements at a fairly high altitude in a largely dry environment. Yet there were accumulated layers of dirt, encrustation with foreign accretions, insect damage, and so on. Various kinds of analyses were undertaken (including x-rays and

Fig. 3. *The horse-head harp found at Zhargalant.*



Fig. 4. *Susanna Schulz's reconstruction of the harp.*





Fig. 5. The bow and arrows from Tsagaan Khad.

microscopic examination) before cleaning and the application of some modern restoration techniques. While conservation and prevention of any further deterioration of the objects was the primary goal, the conservators also had to keep in mind what might make possible the exhibition of the fragile material without subjecting it to any further damage. The before and after comparisons show dramatically the effectiveness of the conservation techniques. Later sections of the book provide details regarding the work on specific objects.

Since so many important aspects of the history of Central Asian nomads are connected with their effective use of archery, the materials in this exhibit are particularly rich for the well preserved bows, arrows and quivers. The examples here range from the early Türk burial to the Mongol period grave found at Tsagaan Khad, in which the bow was still strung (Fig.5) (!). Quivers included ones shaped from wood and birchbark and the later example of one made of leather that had been decorated with an appliqué (Fig. 6). The arrowheads are of several types; of particular interest are the broad-bladed ones that may have been



Fig. 6. The quiver from Tsagaan Khad.

used for hunting game and birds without seriously damaging the targets.

Apart from conservation of the original material, a great deal can be learned from reconstruction attempting to replicate the materials and techniques used by the craftsmen of centuries ago. This kind of experimental archaeology then provides information on construction techniques and on the capabilities of the finished equipment. Holger Reisch, Joachim Rutschke and Ulrich Stehli analyzed and then replicated and tested the Turk period bow, arrows and quiver from Zhargalant. The results reinforce the message of so much of the other evidence we now have regarding the impressive ability of the nomads to maximize the benefit of the resources in the natural environment. While the authors do not attempt to do so, it is of some interest to compare this Turkic period equipment with that from the Xiongnu period, about which we have now learned a lot more thanks Michaela Reisinger's analysis (published in *The Silk Road* 2010) of the bows and arrows unearthed in the recent excavations at Shombuuzin Belchir.

An introduction to the immediate archaeological context for all this fascinating material comes halfway into the book, in the essay by Jan Bemmman and Gonçigsüren Nomguunsüren surveying what is currently known about cave burials in Mongolia, several dozen of which have been discovered. The essay illustrates some of them and shows all their locations on a map. Details on the specific caves from which the exhibition's artifacts came are in the introductions to each section of the catalogue which follows, the finds being grouped by location.

Unfortunately, to date none of the cave burials remained undisturbed prior to their study, which means that important information on the positioning of the artifacts (and, of course, some of the artifacts themselves) has been destroyed. The most frequent scenario has been the accidental discovery of the caves by herders or hunters, who have tended to dig around a bit, remove some objects, and then, perhaps, report the discovery so that archaeologists might do a proper excavation. Sometimes in the interval, additional looting has taken place. We have so much to see here probably only thanks to the fact that some of the organic material which is of greatest interest to us has no obvious monetary value.



Fig. 7. Wooden and leather saddle. From Zhargalant, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag. Türk empire period.

Apart from the musical instrument and archery equipment, the burials preserved saddles (some quite intact, e.g. Fig. 7), horse harness (stirrups, bridle decoration), some pottery, metal buckles and hooks, knives, a unique bag made of fish skin containing fire-starting equipment and an astragalus (the sheep knuckle bone used for divination) (Fig. 8), and clothing. The fish skin bag is a reminder of the importance which fish (or at least depictions of them), somewhat unexpectedly for us, seem to have had for steppe peoples, as Karen Rubinson noted in her essay in *Nomads and Networks*. The clothing from the cave burials in Mongolia includes a largely preserved felt coat, a silk *deel* and leather and felt boots (10th-11th centuries). In the collections of the Inner Mongolia Museum in Hohhot there are some very well preserved examples of silk coats also from the Liao period, and at least one striking *deel* from the Mongol Empire which might be compared with the one here.² Several of the burials contained remains of what likely had been the cart used to transport the body to the burial site, a practice likely followed by the Xiongnu, as discussed by Bryan Miller in this issue of *The Silk Road*.

Anyone wanting to learn about nomad culture in earlier Mongolian history will need to consult this volume, with its rich illustrations, some providing closeup details, and its careful description of the materials, the state of the original finds and the processes of their conservation. Jan Bemann had warned me (almost somewhat apologetically, it seemed) that the exhibition was really quite small –



Fig. 8. Fish skin bag and astragalus. From Chonot uul, Bulgan sum, Khovd aimag. Khitan period, ca. 11th century.

this is not one of your blockbuster shows that will bring in the teeming masses to help shore up the shaky budgets of the hosting museum. But small can be ever so rewarding and important, since it encourages us to look closely at the details. Even if *Steppenkrieger* lacks the dazzle of some of the objects from the elite burials featured in *Nomads and Networks*, it really brings us much closer to an intimate understanding of nomadic culture than does the latter exhibition. But each contributes in important ways to the ongoing process of questioning the old paradigms about rapacious and unsophisticated nomads.

– Daniel C. Waugh

Notes

1. An earlier report on the Zhargalant finds is Tsagaan Törbat et al., "A Rock Tomb of the Ancient Turkic Period in the Zhargalant Khairkhan Mountains, Khovd Aimag, with the Oldes Preserved Horse Head Fiddle in Mongolia—A Preliminary Report," in *Current Archaeological Research in Mongolia*, ed. Jan Bemann et al. (Bonn: Vor-und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2009: 366-83. Note the identification there of the musical instrument as a horse-head fiddle.

2. For the Mongol Empire example, see Adam Kessler, *Empires Beyond the Great Wall: The Heritage of Genghis Khan* (Los Angeles: Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1993: 158-59. For other Mongol period examples, see Ildikó Oka, "Three Mongolian coats from the 13th-14th Century Grave at Burkhiin Khoshuu," in *Current Archaeological Research*, pp. 487-503.