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# The Social Complexity of the Pazyryk Culture in Altai, 550–200 BC\*

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## ABSTRACT

*The reconstruction of the ancient nomads' social organization based on archaeological materials reveals a number of objective difficulties. However, mass material evidence and developed methodological approaches allow, based on the experience of predecessors, presenting the level of the social complexity. The reflection of this situation is demonstrated by the history of studying the world famous Pazyryk culture. A substantial amount of objective information allowed the authors of the article to consistently solve problems of social interpretation of the existing data set and consider the consistency of the selected signs of statehood in relation to the unification of the Altai nomads in the Scythian-Saka time. Based on the several basic indicators (spatial-territorial-geographical factor; population size and density; economic and cultural types; craft activity; presence of large population consolidation centers; social stratification (including management apparatus), taxation; foreign policy contacts, sign-communicative system; worldview, etc.) it is concluded that the population of the Pazyryk were in the process of socio-political complexity formation of the indicated level.*

## INTRODUCTION

The question of the political organization of the nomads of Gorny Altai during the Scythian Epoch began to be considered after the study of the famous elite funeral complexes of Katanda, Berel, Shibe, Pazyryk, Tuekta, and Bashadar (Rudenko 1952, 1953, 1960; Gryaznov 1950;

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Kiselev 1951; Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003). In Soviet archaeology, the history of the 'Pazyryks' was described using the traditional concepts of political genesis among nomads of the Eurasian steppes. For instance, Chernikov (1975) discussed the evolution of the social structure of nomads, including the 'Pazyryks', distinguishing the period of 'military democracy' (from the seventh to fourth centuries BC) and the period of 'primitive statehood in the steppes' (from the third century BC). V. M. Masson took a similar position (1976), while L. S. Yelnitsky (1977) believed that statehood among the nomads of the Scythian Epoch had a patriarchal – slave-owning character. M. P. Gryaznov (1975, 1979) and M. I. Artamonov (1977) insisted on limited social development and its military democracy type among the nomads. N. A. Bokovenko (1981) and E. P. Bunyatyan (1985) supported this viewpoint, believing that the economic and cultural characteristics of nomadic and semi-nomadic societies preconditioned the conservatism of their socioeconomic system and even its stagnation. Most scholars (Grach 1980; Akishev 1993; Savinov 1993; Martynov 1989, and others) were of the belief there existed an early class (early state) structure among the nomadic societies, including the 'Pazyryks'. According to S. A. Vasyutin and P. K. Dashkovskiy (Vasyutin 1998: 13; Vasyutin and Dashkovskiy, 2009), this concept best expressed the researchers' views on the specific features of the societal genesis of nomads within the framework of the general theory of transitional (from pre-class to class) societies. Moreover, this approach of the proponents of the so-called traditional views allowed for the evolution of nomadic societies from early class to slave-owning or feudal ones.

In the 1990s D. E. Anufriev's (1997) opinion on the matter found support among researchers (Vasyutin 1998: 35; Dashkovskiy 2002; Dashkovskiy and Meykshan 2015). He discussed the existence of several polity zones within a single political society in the territory of Gorny Altai during the Pazyryk period. At the same time, Nikolay N. Kradin's (1992, and so on) theory of chiefdom became widespread in the Russian nomad studies. Within the frameworks of this theory, the authors of this paper in their monograph concluded that the 'Pazyryks' went through a period of 'late chiefdoms' in their development, and embarked on the search for a form of early state (Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003: 223). In this paper, we would like to dwell in more detail on the criteria for determining statehood and the possibility of their application to the nomadic society of Gorny Altai during the Scythian Epoch.

A substantial amount of literature deals with the problem of identifying markers of statehood, including some of it specific to historic nomadic societies (Kradin 1992, 2001a, 2007; Kychanov 1997; Khazanov 2002; and others). It is important to note that in some cases the same indicators are used by researchers to characterize both 'state' and 'civilization' (Martynov 1980, 1989; Orazbayeva 2004; and others). This demonstrates

both the interconnection of these concepts and the methodological underdevelopment of this problem. Perhaps this illustrates Nikolay N. Kradin's opinion (2001b: 142) that it is difficult to single out universal criteria of statehood and to formulate a single definition of 'state.' Within contemporary political anthropology, there are various viewpoints on the definition of the term 'state'. These definitions use the history of this phenomenon's origin. However, almost all scholarly views fit within two principal approaches – the 'integration' and the 'conflict' approaches (Kradin 1995, 2001b; Haas 1995; Ambrosino 1995, *etc.*). Within the frameworks of the former approach, the state is viewed as a political system formed to address various organizational needs of a community. The second approach presupposes the emergence of the state as a means of preventing struggle for life-sustaining resources between various groups. Contemporary scholars, particularly Nikolay Kradin (2001b: 140, 210), point to the interconnectedness of these approaches to define the state as a specialized institute that governs a complex society and that has a monopoly on the legal use of force. Therefore the state, on the one hand, performs important social functions (such as protection from enemies and criminals) while on the other hand, providing the elite of the society with a wider access to resources and benefits than the rest of the population.

Among the various markers of statehood, including those applicable to nomadic societies, are the following: territorial division, population size and density, economic and cultural types, artisanal activity, the existence of large population centers (towns, and, as far as the nomads are concerned, separate districts), social stratification including the administrative apparatus, taxation, foreign contacts, an alphabetic communicative system (or script), a worldview system, the status of women, the presence of monumental architecture, *etc.* (Khazanov 2002; Kradin 2001b; A nomadic alternative ... 2002; and others). In this paper, we will consider these parameters separately in their relation to the 'Pazyryk society' to clarify whether or not the required qualitative aggregate of statehood indicators is present.

### **SPATIAL GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR**

The Pazyryk culture occupied a fairly large territory (larger than the modern Republic of Altai) and had a fairly rigid boundary, marked by funerary-commemorative complexes. Within the limits of Gorny Altai, which is characterized by specific orographic and climatic features, several landscape zones can be distinguished. Among them are steppe areas (insular steppes and valleys), taiga, alpine meadows, and foothills (Kiryushin and Tishkin 1997: 93–98). Most 'royal' and 'elite' funeral complexes are concentrated in Central Altai (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003: fig. 3), which suggests that this area was the center of the 'Pazyryk' society. Many archaeological sites have been registered and studied in Southeastern

Altai, as well as in the parts of the vast cultural and historical region (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003: figs 4, 5). Some boundaries of the Pazyryk culture were situated at the junction of mountains and foothills (Dashkovskiy 2016, 2017; Tishkin 2019, *etc.*) or were marked by impassable mountain ranges. It is possible that they were well-guarded.

#### **POPULATION SIZE AND DENSITY**

Current methods for calculating population are based on various factors, mainly environmental ones (Zhelezchikov 1984; Gavrilyuk 1999; Tortika, Mikheev, and Kortiev 1994; Kradin 2001a; and others). These methods provide provisional results. Nonetheless, they make it possible to register historical trends. Calculations of this type have not been performed for the nomadic populations of Gorny Altai, except for some specific regions in the middle and lower reaches of the Katun River (Mironov 1998). These results, however, need to be clarified and adjusted since Mironov applied B. F. Zhelezchikov's methodology, in which other scholars identified several serious flaws (Khaldeev 1987; Kradin 2001a: 73). Population density during the Pazyryk period is evidenced by the presence of many funerary-commemorative complexes (more than 140 in number), from which over 600 objects have already been studied (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003; Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003). The highest concentration of burial mounds was recorded in several zones in the valleys of the rivers Katun, Chuya, Ursul, Argut, Chulyshman, Bukhtarma, Koksus, Charysh and their tributaries (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003), as well as on the Ukok plateau (Molodin *et al.* 2004).

#### **ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TYPES**

Research (Shulga 1994, 2015; Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003: 207–214; and others) has shown that during the period under consideration there were several economic and cultural types, which matched one another quite well: nomadic cattle-breeding, sedentary agricultural cattle-breeding and hunting-gathering economies all existing within the corresponding landscape zones. The predominant economic type in Altai during the Scythian Epoch can be described as free-range cattle breeding in the mountains and valleys. This was also typical for the regions of Tuva, Tien Shan, and Pamir. Cattle-breeding adapted to the specific conditions of mountains and mountain valleys was its basis (Martynov 1986: 11–14). The leading position in the structure of the herd belonged to the horse. The development of horse-breeding was helped along not only by the needs of the population and the relatively favorable natural and climatic conditions, but also by the biology of these animals. Horses were practical to breed because they could be kept year round in the open air on pasture. This development made use of an efficient organization scheme for the entire extensive process of keeping and breeding animals, which survives to this

day (Kiryushin and Tishkin 1997: 102–104). The relative efficiency of economic activity contributed not only to the dignified existence of members of society but also to the output of surplus product and the enrichment of the top layer[s] of society. This is illustrated by the specific features of the Pazyryk funeral rite.

#### **ARTISANAL ACTIVITY**

Like all economic activity during the Pazyryk period, crafting was based on home production, a special form of industrial labor (Kolchin and Saiko 1981: 24), involving the processing of materials and raw materials in the homestead that produces them (Gavrilyuk 1989: 3). At the same time, the ‘Pazyryks’ displayed a tendency to transform individual industries into independent specialized types of craft activity (Dashkovskiy 2005), almost importantly, metallurgy and metalworking. The study of metal objects has shown that nomads knew various methods of processing metal products (tinning, amalgamating, and so on) using the rich deposits of the Sayan-Altai polymetallic center (Kundo, Shcherbakov, and Roslyakova 2000: 176–187) as a raw materials base. The manufacture of various ceramic vessels (Kiryushin and Stepanova 2004), woolen and linen fabrics and clothes sewn from them (Glushkova 2000: 158–161; Polosmak 2001; Polosmak and Barkova 2005), along with bone carving (Borodovsky 1997: 121–129) and woodworking (Mylnikov 1999; Samashev and Mylnikov 2004; and others) were widespread among the population. Additionally, the monumental architecture of elite funerary and commemorative complexes (Gryaznov 1950; Rudenko 1953, 1960; and others) requires a versatile knowledge base and skills. Artistic handicrafts that developed following the needs of society occupy a special place in the Pazyryk culture.

#### **THE EXISTENCE OF LARGE POPULATION CENTERS**

For obvious reasons, the Altai nomads of the Scythian Epoch did not have urban centers. Nevertheless, researchers have identified some comparatively large settlement complexes (Shulga 2015), though questions about their cultural and chronological affiliation have not yet been fully resolved (Abdulganeev 1998; Dashkovskiy 1998). As noted earlier, it is possible to single out several polity zones where populations were concentrated in the region under study (Anufriev 1997). The main indicator marking such zones is the presence of the so-called ‘royal’ and elite funerary-commemorative complexes around which numerous other monuments/burials were gathered. The following territories with such concentrations can be identified in Gorny Altai: the *Ursulskaya* (central) group, including the Ursul Basin and the middle reaches of the Katun River with the Ulita, Shibe, Talda, Tuekta, Kurota, Bashadar, Boochi, Nizhnyaya Sooru, Ker Kechu and other necropolises (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003: fig. 3); the *Chuyskaya* (southeastern and eastern) group – the basins of the

Chuya and the Chulyshman with the Pazyryk burial ground; the *Bukhtarminskaya* (southwestern) group formed around the Berel site in the upper reaches of the Bukhtarma (Samashev 2011); the *Ukokskaya* (southern) group of monuments is close to the previous one and is located in the Argut Basin, on the Ukok Plateau, and in the adjacent regions of North-western Mongolia with the ‘elite’ necropolises Ak-Alakha-1, 3 and Kutturuntas. One can also distinguish the *Charyshskaya* (northwestern) group with the complex in the Szentelek valley (Shulga 2000) as well as Katanda and Kastakhta monuments, which tend to the central group of sites (Kiryushin, Stepanova, and Tishkin 2003: Fig. 3). Based on a study of the geographical location of the Pazyryk sites D. E. Anufriev (1997) identified five tribal centers. Without precluding this, it is nevertheless necessary to more narrowly pinpoint the formation period of the alleged local polity zones.

It is important to note that the population of Gorny Altai was multi-ethnic during this period. This is evidenced by materials used in funeral rites (Marsadolov 1996; Kubarev 1987; Surazakov 1988; Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003; and others) as well as, by anthropological studies of various ethnic groups living in some areas of Gorny Altai, and of their mixing (Chikisheva 2001, 2003, 2012; Tur 1999, 2003). It was probably the elite ethnos that played the role of a consolidating force, developing material and spiritual values and exerting considerable influence in all spheres of life. The presence of this indicator is demonstrated by various characteristics, but we consider the main manifestation to be the implementation of the funeral rites according to dominant ‘Pazyryk’ patterns.

#### **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE APPARATUS**

The social organization of nomadic society was based on a sex-age structure that determined the place of an individual depending on their physical-genetic characteristics. The vertical hierarchy was based on property, professional rank, and other factors. Unlike earlier Scythian times, during the Pazyryk period, there was a high degree of militarization of society and possibly the formation of a squad. Aside from that, a new social category, that of the ‘ministers of religion’ began forming among the nomads, though some ritual activities were still performed by the heads of patriarchal families or clans. It is important to note that ‘Pazyryk’ society was characterized by a high social status of women (Polosmak 2001). Available data suggest that women were equal to men in the running of their household and, possibly, during certain times when the men were absent (because of warfare or hunting) it was the women who bore the sole responsibility for livestock and protection of their territory (Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003: 195–207). Furthermore, women were allowed access to sacred knowledge based on the fact that in the burials of so-called min-

isters of faith, archaeologists recovered mostly female remains (Dashkovskiy 2018).

Elites played an important role in the development of nomadic society (Tishkin 2005; Dashkovskiy 2015). These included representatives of the ruling, clerical, and military strata. They determined the sociocultural dynamics of the nomadic society in virtually all spheres of life (Dashkovskiy 2005). Taking the multiethnic character of the Pazyryk nomadic association into account, we conclude that an alien ethnic group controlled the rest of the population. A substantial labor force was required to satisfy the numerous needs of the elite. This labor force could be made up of the ranks of dependent people (prisoners of war, slaves, impoverished people, *etc.*). An administrative apparatus was needed to organize and control these people/laborers, as well as to maintain order in the confederation. Research carried out by the authors revealed a complex hierarchy within ‘Pazyryk’ society (Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003).

### **TAXATION**

Determining the specific forms of taxation and the distribution of material wealth (spoils of war) in nomadic societies is a complex undertaking (Kradin 1992, 2001a; Khazanov 2002, and others). There existed various forms of taxation or ‘duties’. The construction of large funerary-commemorative complexes required substantial human resources. For instance, the construction of the Second Badashar mound required 3000–3500 labor-days, not counting animal draught power (Rudenko 1952: 55–56). M.P. Gryaznov's viewpoint regarding this issue is interesting. Having carefully studied the materials from the First Pazyryk mound he suggested that the burial contained ‘...gifts to the tribal chieftain from ten leaders of clans.’ He also noted that the practice of offering gifts to the chieftain by the clan leaders existed in everyday life. This practice was the ‘norm of economic relations’ between the mass of main producers and clan and tribal officials (Gryaznov 1950: 69–71). Later research by S. I. Rudenko (1960: 240–241) suggested that the objects from the First Pazyryk mound were not gifts, but rather the personal belongings of the deceased. Nevertheless, the practice of offering gifts was widespread in the nomadic world as early as the early Scythian period (Gryaznov 1980; Kradin 2001a: 107–110, and others). The common use of other forms of ‘indirect taxation’ should not be ruled out. The presence of imported luxury goods (carpets, fabrics, household items) in elite burials testifies to the fact that the elite received significant portions of the spoils of war or income from exchanges.

### **FOREIGN POLICY CONTACTS**

Numerous finds of imported West Asian, Chinese, and other items in the Pazyryk mounds, as along with the militarized character of society sug-

gest vigorous military and political activity (Rudenko 1952: 60–63; Marsadolov 1996; Dashkovskiy and Novikova 2017). Stories about marriages between nomadic ‘rulers’ and Chinese ‘princesses’ are proven by materials from the Fifth Pazyryk mound. Furthermore, if we follow those scholars who identify the Pazyryks with the Yuezhi (Rudenko 1960; Savinov 1993; Klyashtorny and Savinov 2005, and others), Chinese chronicles are quite thorough in characterizing cultural-historical and political aspects of the development of nomads in the late first millennium BC. Additionally, contacts with eastern and western powers made the ‘Pazyryks’ familiar with statehood, leading them to borrow certain forms of such organization, depending on what their elite needed at the moment, as well as the existing opportunities and necessary conditions.

#### **ALPHABETIC COMMUNICATIVE SYSTEM**

In later periods, writing acts as the main medium for the transfer of sociocultural information. There are virtually no data on the existence of writing among the nomads of Eurasia during the Scythian Epoch. According to a widespread ‘information explosion hypothesis’, the art was the most important means of communication in the pre-literate period (Sher 1998). It was used to store and transmit information concerning all spheres of life of the collective. The ambiguity of plots and characters in Pazyryk art, in which one can trace West Asian and Chinese influence, is well-known thanks to numerous finds in burial sites and petroglyphs (Rudenko 1961; Kubarev 1991; Perevodchikova 1994; Polosmak 2001, and others). The information load of both separate elements and syncretic images is yet to be determined. Their deciphering will require years of work. However, the presence of a ‘worldview layer’ in the nomadic ‘animal style’ and its role as a form of writing, information storage, carrying and transmission medium is already well-established.

#### **THE WORLDVIEW SYSTEM**

The dominant religious belief and mythology formed the core of the nomadic worldview during the Pazyryk period (Polosmak, 2001; Dashkovskiy 2002, 2011; Tishkin and Dashkovskiy 2003). Due to the peculiarities of ‘Pazyryk’ cultural and historical development, their religion was syncretic. This is illustrated by funerary-commemorative rites, customs, and beliefs. Just like in settled society/just like it did for farmers, the sacralization of rulers at the worldview and ideological levels played an important role in the life of nomads. As early as the Scythian Epoch, the ruler acted as a personification of unity and harmony not only of society but of the entire universe, since the mythological (cosmological) and the social were inseparable in it (Dashkovskiy 2007). Hence, the death of the ruler (later of the ruling clan or dynasty) meant the onset of the critical stage and the destruction of the world. The advent of another ‘king’ with a ‘hea-



venly mandate' was to mark the return of order in the universe. After the funeral of the 'king', his burial complex acted as a symbol of unity of nomads, along with the new ruler. In many cases, the nomads began using such locations for complex ritual actions. The 'royal' mounds of the Pazyryk burial in Altai are an example of this. They were repeatedly used as chamber-chapels (Savinov 1997). Another example is the burial complex of Urochishche Balchikovo-3 (Shulga 2000). It should be noted that in nomadic society a burial site was considered to be a kind of model of the world (Dashkovskiy 2002; Olkhovskiy 1999; Marsadolov 2000). In this particular case, the royal burial complex acted as a kind of worldview center for the entire sociocultural association. Therefore, it is no coincidence that some scholars see sacral centers of the nomadic world in the Pazyryk necropolis (Kurochkin 1993). They also view those buried there as the heroized and deified 'chieftains' of the nomads (Motov 1998).

### CONCLUSION

Summing up, we note that the available factual data and methodological principles of characterizing statehood allow us to discuss the process of state formation among the 'Pazyryks' of Gorny Altai as one of the early forms of political entity. Further theoretical studies will make it possible to specify the criteria of the nomadic state and substantiate these markers with additional evidence. In conclusion we note that, according to Klyashtorny, the Yuezhi had already had their nomadic empire in Inner Asia – a multiethnic entity created by military force in the process of conquest, ruled by military-administrative methods, which disintegrated after the decline of the political power of its creators (Klyashtorny and Savinov 2005: 9, 25).

### NOTES

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