

COMPLEXITY OF INTERACTION  
ALONG THE EURASIAN STEPPE ZONE  
IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM CE

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Edited by  
Jan Bemann

COMPLEXITY OF INTERACTION  
ALONG THE EURASIAN STEPPE ZONE  
IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM CE

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Jan Bemann, Michael Schmauder

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## PREFACE

This volume combines contributions to a conference of the same title which was held February 9 to 11, 2012, in Bonn. Idea and format of the meeting had been developed through a process of intensive discussions among the editors in close cooperation with Dieter Quast, RGZM Mainz. Our original intention was to organize a conference with a focus on archaeology, bearing in mind questions concerning mobility and communication or – stated differently – exchange patterns in Eurasia. After having recognized that research in Eurasia is still dominated by site centric approaches which makes vast overviews as we imagined them somewhat cumbersome we deviated from our first outline.

As a consequence, we broadened the field for two further aspects which had been nearly neglected thus far. First, there are West–East ranging communications in the Eurasian steppe zone which lie beyond the overarching term “Silk Roads”. As written sources rarely throw light on interactions among steppe polities, these interactions are markedly less frequently subject to scientific discussions. This question is best approached via archaeological analyses with a wide focus in geographical terms. North–South contacts are by far more commonly discussed than West–East communications, as they encompass interactions between states with foremost sedentary population and nomads who live north of these territories. As a rule, it is the sedentary viewpoint which is being told, as these cultures opposed to the nomads left numerous written accounts<sup>1</sup>. At the same time we wanted to encourage comparative perspectives. Characteristics often assumed to be typical of the relations between sedentary people and nomads are also true in comparable measures of those between Rome/Byzantium and their “barbaric” neighbors. What they all have in common is at least a distinct mobility in space, even though to varying forms and degrees. Furthermore, questions and themes long discussed in European archaeology and history entered the research of Inner Asia and Central Asia only recently, as, for example, identity, the emergence of new ethnic groups, frontiers, frontier societies, contact zones, elites, economies of prestige goods. We therefore wanted to invite colleagues of different disciplines and regions to join in a scientific dispute. Lively discussions during the conference and positive feedback by attendees show that this idea was appreciated.

The second aspect to be included can be summarized under the term “complexity”, which in this context should not be understood as a concept from the social sciences but metaphorically. Over long periods of time simple explanations of cultural phenomena were favored, be it statements on pure and poor nomads, the dependency theory or the bad habit of explaining every cultural change with large-scale migrations. “Complexity” is meant as a signal and reminder that the simplest explanations are not always the best, which is reflected by the contributions in this volume.

<sup>1</sup> Numerous projects within the framework of the Collaborative Research Center (Sonderforschungsbereich) 586 “Difference and Integration” at the University Leipzig and the Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg dealt intensively with interactions between

nomads and settled people, a good overview of publications thus far is given by the center’s website <http://nomadsed.de/home/>.

We consciously limited the temporal scope of the papers to the time after the Scyths and before the Mongols, somewhat clumsily described as the “first millennium CE”, because these two eras have been traditionally paid enormous attention to and are represented in a corresponding flood of publications<sup>2</sup>. At the same time interactions in the steppe zone witnessed only during the centuries around the turn of the era a hitherto unknown rise in intensity and dynamics.

Not all of the works presented at the conference are included in this volume as they were already noted for publications elsewhere. This applies to the presentations given by Enno Giele, Valentina Mordvintseva, and Matthias Pfisterer. However, other colleagues who could not attend the conference were invited to hand in manuscripts. All contributions were revised and partly expanded, which to our delight resulted in this comprehensive volume. We would have loved to have included a paper on the consequences of climate change and meteorological events on the politics of the Eurasian steppe as such conditions win more and more popularity as *explanans* of significant changes<sup>3</sup>, but it did not work out. To our dismay and because of different reasons the western steppes and Central Asia are less represented than we wished for.

We subdivided the contributions into four parts: “Nomadic Empires – Modes of Analysis” encompasses highly different approaches to interpretations and analyses of nomadic empires, ranging from computational agent-based models, over anthropological to historical methodology. Better than any perfect introduction this multi-faceted research shows how exciting it is to deal with this area much neglected in World History. Although the section “Xiongnu, the Han Empire and the Oriental Koine” assembles merely three contributions, it covers more than 260 pages. If nothing else, this certainly echoes the boom of Xiongnu archaeology of the past decades. By taking into account enormous amounts of archaeological, art historical, and written sources the authors surmount traditional and often too static schemes of interpretation. These new analyses detect an astonishing variety of interactions during the centuries around the turn of the era, which broadens our understanding of this epoch and provides new avenues for other regions and periods at the same time. In the third section, “Inner and Central Asia from the Türks to the Mongols”, nine contributions exemplify a multicolored and almost continuously changing picture of languages, ethnicities, and political affinities for Inner and Central Asia from the sixth to the twelfth centuries. Political affinities, however, were changing so quickly due to situational demands as to almost refute all efforts to retrace them within the archaeological record. Decision makers were astonishingly well informed about even distant regions and they acted accordingly over vast distances. The studies at hand analyze exchange processes on varying

<sup>2</sup> See for the Scyths for example W. Menghin/H. Parzinger/A. Nagler/M. Nawroth (eds.), *Im Zeichen des goldenen Greifen. Königsgräber der Skythen. Begleitband zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung*: Berlin, Martin-Gropius-Bau, 6. Juli – 1. Oktober 2007; München, Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, 26. Oktober 2007 – 20. Januar 2008; Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 15. Februar – 25. Mai 2008 (München, Berlin 2007); H. Parzinger, *Die Skythen*. 3rd ed. (München 2009); J. Aruz (ed.), *The Golden Deer of Eurasia: Scythian and Sarmatian Treasures from the Russian Steppes* (New York, New Haven 2000); J. Aruz/A. Farkas/A. Alekseev/E. Korolkova (eds.), *The Golden Deer of Eurasia. Perspectives on the Steppe Nomads of the Ancient World*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Symposia (New Haven 2006). See

for the Mongol period *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben. Das Weltreich der Mongolen* (2005); W. W. Fitzhugh/M. Rossabi/W. Honeychurch (eds.), *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire* (Seattle 2009); see also the website of the European Research Council Grant “Mobility, Empire and Cross Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia” <http://mongol.huji.ac.il/>, which provides an extensive bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> N. Pederson/A. Hessel/N. Baatarbileg/K. Anchukaitis/N. Di Cosmo, *Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, 2014, 4375–4379; J. Fei/J. Zhou/Y. Hou, *Circa A.D. 626 Volcanic Eruption, Climatic Cooling, and the Collapse of the Eastern Turkic Empire*. *Climatic Change* 81, 2007, 469–475.



levels – from language to embassies – as well as aspects of mobility, from the integration of foreign symbols of power to large-scale migrations, or methods of state-building to the strategic destruction of complex states. The last section combines papers that focus on “Nomadic Interaction with the Roman and Byzantine West” traversing the Eurasian steppe zone from east to west. These case studies, either already comparative or suitable for further comparisons, give reason to assume that although there are certain encompassing communalities every conquest and struggle with the empires of the West is historically unique. At the same time it becomes apparent that the knowledge base of the decision makers in the Roman Empire had been greater than hitherto thought.

The variety of studies assembled in this volume leaves no doubt as to how dynamically and diversely the interactions, processes, and transformations developed in the Eurasian steppe zone. These changes cannot be studied under common schemes of interpretation which are more often than not inseparable from overcome clichés.

Chinese names and terms have been transliterated according to the Pinyin system, Russian names and references according to the system of the Library of Congress. Arabic, Persian, and Turkic names and terms appear in the form chosen by the authors of the individual chapters.

#### Acknowledgements

The conference had been jointly prepared and organized together with Ursula Brosseder and Timo Stickler. We thank both of them for their cordial and companionable collaboration. Susanne Reichert engaged to such an extent in the editing work of the papers that it was a delight for us to include her as co-editor. The edition of this volume in addition to ongoing obligations and projects could only be managed as a team.

Our heartfelt thanks also goes to Daniel Waugh, Seattle, who has helped us now repeatedly with translations and language editing. Without his honorary efforts we would never have been able to integrate Sergey Vasyutin’s thoughts in this book. Thanks to his enormous overview and language knowledge Peter Golden saved us from mistakes concerning the correct transliteration of names in the contributions of Tatiana Skrynnikova and Sergey Vasyutin. Image editing lay in Gisela Höhn’s sterling hands. She also promoted to create – as far as possible – a unified map basis for all contributions as to facilitate visualizing the different regions. Editing work was done by the proven team Ute Arents and Güde Bemann, substantially supported by Susanne Reichert. We owe Alicia Ventresca Miller, Kiel, as a native speaker many suggestions for improvement and stimuli. All authors and editors highly appreciate their painstaking efforts. For desktop publishing, which in the face of a multitude of different scripts demands unconventional solutions, we were able to win Matthias Weis. If not stated otherwise, images were provided by the authors and merely serve to illustrate.

The conference was made possible by the generous financial support from the Gerda Henkel Foundation. As always, it was our delight to collaborate with the foundation, a cooperation characterized by mutual trust. The meeting took place in the LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, which during the same time displayed the exhibition “Steppe Warriors – Nomads on Horseback of Mongolia from the 7th to 14th centuries” (“Steppenkrieger – Reiternomaden des 7.–14. Jahrhunderts aus der Mongolei”). Thus the participants had the opportunity to get insight into an on-

going cooperation between the Institute of Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the Department of Prehistory and Early Historical Archaeology of the University of Bonn, and the LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn. We thank the State Association of the Rhineland (Landschaftverband Rheinland) for the use of rooms and technical equipment of the museum and the financial support in printing this volume.

Our sincere thanks is owed to everyone who contributed to the success of the conference and the resulting book. With great joy we remember the inspiring and cordial atmosphere during the meeting.

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March 2015

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