

BOOK REVIEW

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Book review of *Masters of the Steppe: The Impact of the Scythians and Later Nomad Societies of Eurasia* edited by Svetlana V Pankova and St John Simpson

Robin Bendrey*

Book details

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Main text

In the first millennium BCE, communities distributed over thousands of kilometres across Eurasia are recognisably connected by shared material culture, commonly known as the Scythian triad, including horse equipment, weaponry and animal-style art. *Masters of the Steppe: the Impact of the Scythians and Later Nomad Societies of Eurasia* explores in detail these communities and their connections with their neighbours. The name Scythians derives from that used by Herodotus for the mobile pastoralists that lived to the north of the Black Sea but is often used to refer to the wider cultural complex that extends into Central Asia.

This volume stems from a conference that accompanied the 2017/18 British Museum exhibition *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia*. It represents a broad, international authorship, with 46 papers produced by 58 co-authors drawn from 16 countries. In addition, the introduction to the volume clearly lays out the aims, scope and challenges of creating and delivering the exhibition, and the editors'

concluding chapter expertly pulls together the academic content raised in the collected papers. The papers themselves are diverse in scope and approach, reaching in time and space beyond the remit of the exhibition and representing the different disciplinary expertise of the archaeologists, historians, curators and scientists who contributed to them. The following pulls out some key themes and highlights several of the chapters, as the range of papers and sheer quantity of content presented is too much to review in detail in the space here.

The burial mounds, also known as kurgans, that stand out in the landscape of the Eurasian steppes are a notable theme in the volume. The tradition of constructing burial mounds begins in the eastern steppe, with the earliest dated example being that of Arzhan 1 in Tuva, southern Siberia, in the late ninth/early eighth century BCE, after which their construction spreads to the Pontic steppes in the west by the seventh/sixth century BCE. Chapters include overviews of key sites, such as the detailed analysis of the construction sequence of the elite burial mound of Arzhan 2 by Chugunov (located very close near to Arzhan 1, but dated c.200 years later) and the recent excavations at the massive Alexandropol kurgan in the Pontic steppe discussed by Polin and Daragan. The latter was constructed in the later fourth century BCE to a height of 24 m high, with a basal diameter of

*Correspondence:

Robin Bendrey
robin.bendrey@ed.ac.uk
School of History, Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh,
William Robertson Wing, Old Medical School, Edinburgh, UK



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95 m and a total volume of 130,000 m³. Polin and Daragan calculate that the area of steppe needed to cut the turfs to construct the kurgan would have been around 65 ha and involved the labour of thousands of people. The recent excavations also found evidence of a funerary feast adjacent to the kurgan, which had been hidden beneath the spoil heap from the original investigation of the mound in 1852–1856 CE. It would have been interesting to learn a little more about the structure of the livestock herds from which the animals for this feast were drawn. Barfield, in his chapter, explores why these truly massive tombs emerge later in the history of the Scythians, as is also seen with the Xiongnu. He sees these as public monuments to articulate visible political strength at a time when these steppe nomadic polities were experiencing declines in power. Using an anthropological approach, Barfield compares the hierarchical social structures of Scythian polities to that of other nomadic peoples that are considered characteristically egalitarian. In an insightful chapter, Taylor and colleagues reassess the broader evidence for social stratification and complexity of the Scythian phenomenon and consider whether it may in fact represent a ‘state level’ formation.

The analysis of material culture excavated from sites along the steppe makes a major contribution to the volume. Studies of the rich array of excavated gold objects are particularly prominent, as in the chapter by Gorskaya and also that by Mongiatta and Korolkova. Other notable chapters include the consideration of animal-style art by Korolkova and a masterful overview of Achaemenid and Greek artistic forms from the steppe by Francfort in the exploration of the relationships between Scythians and their neighbours. It is also great to see the major insights that archaeological science approaches are making, especially in the reanalysis of curated materials from older excavations, as exemplified by the chapter analysing the textiles recovered from Arzhan 1 by Pankova and colleagues.

Horse-human relationships feature significantly in the archaeology of the first millennium BC steppes, as they do (to lesser degrees) across much of northern Eurasia at this time (Bendrey and Oakes *in press*). The horses themselves are explored by Lepetz et al., who undertake a highly detailed investigation of the animals interred in graves of the Pazyryk culture of the Mongolian Altai. They explore the age, gender, health and colour of the animals and also their form of sacrifice. The chapter by Ochir-Goryaeva discusses the magnificently elaborated ceremonial harnesses of the horses buried in the richest of the Pazyryk tombs. They identify spatial patterns in the distribution of horse headdress masks—horses buried with masks in the eastern part of the Pazyryk cultural area were disguised as deer and those in the western part

as sheep. Ochir-Goryaeva proposes that these horses served as a means of creating moving representations of mythical animals. When we also consider the heightened noise, activity and emotion surrounding the slaughter of large numbers of horses at these burial sites, as powerfully described by Argent (2016), we get a sense of how these rituals may have been experienced. At Arzhan 1, for example, there were over 160 horses interred within the mound (Gryaznov 1984).

Herodotus’ *Histories* is a source frequently drawn on throughout the volume. Even though there are major criticisms from literary historians as noted by the editors of the volume, it remains a valued and much-used source for integrating with the archaeological record. It is certainly the case that many of the details Herodotus describes in relation to the funerary and burial customs of the Scythian elites are confirmed from the archaeological record (Ivantchik 2011), including famously the evidence for embalming from the Pazyryk culture (Rudenko 1970). An excellent example of the application of archaeological science techniques to testing Herodotus’ writings comes from the chapter by Spindler et al. in the volume. Herodotus wrote of Scythian archers flaying the right arm of their vanquished enemies to use the skin to cover their quivers. Spindler et al. tested this by analysing 38 fragments of decorated leather quivers from ten kurgans by scanning electron microscopy and also mass spectrometry to identify samples of collagen extracted to species. From the samples analysed, they identified a broad range of taxa, including most commonly goat and sheep, but also one positive identification for the use of human skin in one case (from Ilyinka kurgan 4, burial 2). This can be related to wider evidence for conflict and violence in Scythian society addressed in the volume. Chapters deal with the artefactual evidence of weapons, for example, that authored by Loades on Scythian archery drawing on the author’s experience of riding and shooting with replica equipment, as well as the skeletal evidence of inter-personal violence as evidenced by Murphy and Chistov at the cemetery complex of Aymyrlyg in Tuva, southern Siberia.

Much of what is considered by the chapters in the book speaks to that which is most visible from the mortuary record. As Taylor et al. argue, the spectacularly high-visibility material practices must have impressed contemporary witnesses in similar ways as they impress our museum-going public. The consideration of this evidence in part presents a picture of those elements deliberately selected for representation, with many other features of nomadic life being less visible such as the animal populations beyond those male horses selected for riding. Wider trends in the current research, in particular, the application of archaeological science approaches for the recovery

and analysis of animal and plant remains, are broadening debates around steppe archaeology, for example, showing that some of these pastoral groups were not as mobile as once imagined and also that some engaged in mixed economic systems of farming and herding (e.g. Rouse et al. 2022; Spengler et al. 2021).

Masters of the Steppe: the Impact of the Scythians and Later Nomad Societies of Eurasia is an impressive volume, bringing together a variety of new research and key summaries of scholarship. It is wonderfully illustrated, with over 600 images, allowing a rich window into the visual culture of these steppe pastoral communities. It is a substantial and highly detailed academic contribution that will make an essential resource for those working on the pastoral communities of the later prehistoric Eurasian steppe and their neighbours. Pulling all these data and ideas into one place is a rich resource, providing the current picture of research across this vast geographical area, but also helping to point the way for the next wave of investigations. Undoubtedly, insights will come from new excavations as well as re-analysis of museum-curated collections as this volume so clearly illustrates the potential.

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