

Editorial

Nomadic Material Culture: Eurasian Archeology beyond Textual Traditions

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1. Introduction

The term nomadic material culture refers to the tools, equipment, and other tangible items associated with communities that are characterized by a high degree of residential mobility. In ancient Eurasia, this mobility often revolved around pastoralism wherein livestock management on horseback played a central role in the economy and way of life by involving a large proportion of the population in seasonal migrations between pastures, water sources, and camp sites (Khazanov 1994, p. 17). This propensity for mobility has traditionally been of secondary importance in the archeological study of Eurasian Iron Age societies. Although researchers have long highlighted the spread of objects relating to horse-borne mobility and armament—notably missile weapons, short-bladed swords, and bridle components—they have tended to be interested less in what these finds reveal about people’s ability to move than in how recurring assemblages can be identified with the population groups mentioned in historical sources, such as the Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sarmatians (e.g., Rolle 1989; Cunliffe 2019). The articles brought together in this Special Issue of *Arts* seek to redress this bias by reframing the archeological heritage of the Eurasian steppe around questions of mobility, innovation, diversity, and mutual transformation.

2. Nomadic Material Culture as an Investigative Framework

The emphasis on material as opposed to archeological culture is intended to challenge customary modes of classification and interpretation in the discipline. Admittedly, the choice is not without its problems. In recent decades, anthropologists have grown increasingly wary of the homogenizing and essentializing impetus of the culture concept (Hicks 2010, pp. 26–27). Following James Clifford’s well-known critique (Clifford 1988), they stress that the modern idea of culture is a legacy of colonial ethnography that sought to contain and control otherness through classification. They argue instead for an understanding of culture as dynamic, contested, and contingent on processes of interaction, exchange, and negotiation. More recent theorists have come to question whether it is at all possible to conceive of culture as a separate domain of mental representations or significations that are ontologically prior to their material constitution (Olsen 2003; Ingold 2007). Last but not least, advocates of posthuman or flat ontologies question the culture concept on account of the priority it gives to humans as agents and the hierarchies this imposes between material and mental or natural and cultural entities. Such hierarchies build on binary divisions that are, for better or worse, distinctive of Western modernity (Latour 1993).

Irrespective of these criticisms, the concept of material culture can provide a welcome invitation to meditate more broadly on the relationships between people and things across space and time, regardless of particular historical events, processes, or names (Anon 1996, p. 5). This reflection is indeed why the category first came into being, as Dan Hicks has illustrated (Hicks 2010, pp. 30–38). In the English-speaking world, the expression material culture appears to have been coined in museum anthropology of the inter-war period in the twentieth century. It was conceived partly in reaction to the focus on the socio-technical evolution of “primitive” societies best known from the linear-progressive scheme devised by Augustus Pitt-Rivers (1875). To contemporary museum scholars, it offered a way to



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distinguish their endeavor from earlier antiquarian collecting and to bring their work under the emergent sociological paradigm inspired by Émile Durkheim, with its growing emphasis on systematic fieldwork and empirical observation. In view of the category's genesis, it is no accident that its extension to nomadic heritage finds to date little explicit consideration outside museum publications, such as Ken Teague's book on the Horniman collection in London (Teague 2000).

What matters in the context of this Special Issue is that the term's currency also challenges the notion of homogenous ethnic groups that are central to culture-historical approaches in archaeology (Hicks 2010, p. 34). Culture history is an explanatory framework that focuses on the chronological and geographical sequence of cultural developments, often using artifacts to define cultural phases and reconstruct historical narratives (Trigger 2006, pp. 211–313). Culture-historical interpretation aims to identify cultural or ethnic groups and trace their technological changes and geographical spread over time, usually through typological classification, stratigraphy, and distribution maps. Among the paradigm's most influential proponents were Gustaf Kossinna and Vere Gordon Childe (Lucy 2005, pp. 86–109). While the former's studies often tried to connect archeological cultures directly to specific historical people, the latter was interested in the spread of technological innovations—for instance, in metallurgy or farming—and their ostensibly determining impact on culture and society. In Russian and Soviet archaeology, the basic premises of the culture-historical method were widely adopted through the influence of such leading figures as Boris Grakov, Vladimir Gorodtsov, and Mikhail Artamonov, either directly through Kossinna's work or by way of his predecessor, Oscar Montelius (Trigger 2006, pp. 326–28; Klejn 2012, p. 165; Porucznik 2021, pp. 3–15).

Culture history continues to play a pivotal role in the archaeology of Eurasia. A key factor in the rise and persistence of culture-historical interpretation is the rich legacy of the Greco-Roman sources dealing with the geography and inhabitants of the northern Black Sea area, often from a quasi-ethnographic point of view (Rostovtzeff 1931, pp. 1–139; Skinner 2012; Meyer 2020; Porucznik 2021, pp. 132–82). Of foremost importance is the description written in the fifth century BCE by the Greek historian Herodotus (Corcella 2007, pp. 454–721). Drawing on previous sources and contemporary informants, Herodotus (4.5–82) composed a detailed excursus on Scythia and its diverse customs and populations as a preamble to his recounting of the region's invasion by the Persian king Darius. However, using Herodotus as a source in archeological interpretation entails at least two methodological obstacles.

Firstly, in referring to the people he describes, Herodotus switches back and forth between employing names as broad cultural designations or as ethnonyms in the strict sense, referring to a group with shared cultural traits that claimed co-sanguinity. The key instance is Herodotus' ethnic interpretation of the name Scythian (deriving from Skoloti) in his account of the nomads' mythical ancestry (4.5–7), which contrasts with his references elsewhere (4.17–23) to other people who espoused Scythian customs and to sedentary groups that claimed Scythian ancestry but engaged in agriculture or mixed economies (Meyer 2021). Although similar uncertainties apply to the names of other steppe populations mentioned by ancient authors, the lack of fit between textual and archeological categories has rarely invited systematic scrutiny (Ivantchik 2001; Meyer 2013, pp. 98–107; Meyer forthcoming; Mordvintseva 2017). As Oksana Lifantii points out, the ambiguous meaning of the name Scythian in the ancient sources invited conflicting usages in modern literature, with some authors reserving the term in its ethnic meaning for the mobile pastoralists and farmers between the Danube and Don rivers and others employing it as a broad designation for early Iron Age equestrian nomads across the Eurasian steppe, regardless of whether they considered themselves Scythians or not (Lifantii 2024). Either way, even this cursory glance at nomenclature shows that Scythian, as much as any other ethnic name appearing in the classical tradition, cannot constitute an archeological culture in the sense Kossinna and his successors had envisaged.

Secondly, the overarching narrative aims of Herodotus' history required him to switch back and forth between treating the Scythians as ethnographic subjects of his survey of the northern Black Sea region or as historical actors partaking in his account of failed Persian imperial expansionism. Although the ethnographic passages prompted some acknowledgement of the Scythians' diverse subsistence and residential patterns, the event-based sections dealing with Darius' invasion impelled the author to depict the Scythians as the antithesis of Mediterranean urban cultures (Hartog 1988). Thanks to Herodotus and other "ethnographic" authors, the Scythians became nomads par excellence, defined in terms of the achievements of sedentism that they lacked—specifically, as illiterate wagon dwellers who lived on meat and milk instead of grain and wine, fought as equestrian archers rather than mass-ranked hoplites, and adhered to their ancestral customs with violent suspicion of outsiders (Shaw 1982–1983). If we are to accept wholesale this classical tradition of nomadic otherness, the people of the Eurasian steppe compensated for their lack of civilization with depraved hostility, decapitating or blinding their captive enemies or engaging in cannibalism.

The stereotyped description of Scythian nomadism has had far-reaching implications for modern perceptions of Eurasian antiquity both in and beyond academia. The depiction of the steppe as the dominion of warlike herders on horseback has blinded researchers to evidence for segmentary economic specialization within and across local communities and mixed subsistence systems involving agriculture alongside pastoral activities. This evidence can no longer be ignored in light of the recent insights into dietary practices in the northern Black Sea region that show that mobility patterns were selective and restricted to individuals and groups embedded in otherwise sedentary landscapes (Ventresca Miller et al. 2019; Ventresca Miller et al. 2021). The remarkable advances in isotope analysis and archaeobotany in Central Asia have revolutionary implications for Eurasian archaeology in other regions of the steppe belt by accentuating the local variabilities in subsistence strategies and supplanting established narratives of nomadic homogeneity with a rich tapestry of interconnected economic practices and social formations (Spengler et al. 2021).

It could be argued that the focus on nomadic material culture in this volume reinforces this age-old bias by suggesting an intrinsic connection with pastoralism. Against this objection, we make the case for a broad definition of nomadism in line with the current literature on mobility in anthropology, archaeology, and geography (Barnard and Wendrich 2008; Beaudry and Parno 2013; Leary 2014; Hamilakis 2018; Gibson et al. 2021). Although the term derives from the Greek word *nomos* for pasture (or *nomas* for people who "roam around for pasture") (Meyer 2021), its meaning currently hinges on the aspect of residential mobility (Wendrich and Barnard 2008, p. 5). Willeke Wendrich and Hans Barnard define this mobility as "the capacity and need for movement from place to place," an explanation that foregrounds the movement of people and individuals across landscapes, but "leaves their organization and motivations to be determined" (p. 5). They distinguish four basic types of mobility that can acquire nomadic characteristics:

- The entire group travels from resource to resource;
- Segments of different groups travel to and from specific resource areas;
- Segments of the group gather resources for a base camp;
- The entire group travels, following a distinct and fixed pattern (p. 5).

In a similar vein, Roger Cribb cautions against typologies that categorize groups as being either sedentary, nomadic, or transhumant. Rather, sedentary and nomadic strategies should be viewed along a dynamic continuum of overlapping and interlocking practices. The chief criteria of nomadism are, in his view, the human rather than animal involvement in the movements and the potential for shifting migratory patterns wholesale into neighboring environments (Cribb 1991, pp. 18–19).

3. Summary of the Special Issue

Although mobility in the Eurasian steppe was often linked to pastoralism, the occurrence at archeological sites of what we seek to explore as nomadic material culture is

not a sufficient condition for identifying the presence of pastoral nomads. The examples of nomadic heritage explored in this Special Issue should instead be taken to express a potential for mobility with a wide range of conceivable motivations, be they economic, military, or political. The multiplicity of motivations can be gleaned through the three topics emphasized in the summary below.

3.1. Technological Innovation and Modification

One prevalent way in which previous scholarship has characterized nomadic material culture is through contrasts with the range of finds expected at archeological sites of sedentary populations (Cribb 1991, pp. 68–69). Distinctive traits that are commonly highlighted include the portability of possessions and the corresponding absence of permanent architectural structures. A simplistic juxtaposition between sedentary and nomadic sites is, however, increasingly untenable in view of the structures brought to light through systematic surface surveys and excavation in Kazakhstan, Tuva, and Mongolia (Honeychurch and Makarewicz 2016, pp. 349–50; Chang 2018, pp. 39–76; Spengler et al. 2021; Zhogova et al. 2023). Even at such exemplary nomad sites as the Pazyryk mounds, the log cabins built inside the largest mounds point to migration patterns tied to permanent winter installations, as Karen Rubinson and Kathryn Linduff indicate (Rubinson and Linduff 2024). More generally, nomadic groups have been recognized for the technological innovations that supported their lifestyles, including advancements in metallurgy and the design of weaponry and horse gear, which were crucial for subsistence activities and warfare.

In our Special Issue, several contributions detail interesting ways in which preexisting artifacts were modified to suit the needs of mobility. For instance, Sergei Polin and Marina Daragan explore the unique construction and functional adaptations of Greek bronze greaves discovered in Scythian burial mounds (Polin and Daragan 2023). Distinctive adjustments include the large openings cut into the inner sides of the greaves from Barrow 6 near Vodoslavka in Southern Ukraine. Located where the calf muscles protruded, these openings were covered with sewn-on pads of thick leather, a modification likely made to improve comfort and functionality for riders. Similar alterations are observed on greaves from classical-era Scythian sites across the Pontic steppe and forest-steppe and thus suggest a widespread practice and advanced metalworking skills among Scythian artisans. In a similar vein, Oksana Lifantii's reconsideration of a type of personal adornment worn by the Scythian elite in the northern Black Sea region shows how highly skilled Scythian craftspeople modified preexisting—and, in some cases, imported—elements and combined them with purposely designed ones to create complex meshes that were sewn onto garments (Lifantii 2024). Consisting of gold and gilded silver tubes, beads and pendants of sheet metal, the resulting jewelry forms were devised to meet their wearers' cultural predilections for visually striking markers of identity that doubled as portable wealth.

Several contributions reconsider evidence for goldsmithing technology in potentially mobile contexts. Barbara Armbruster and Caspar Meyer present the results of an interdisciplinary study of the Early Scythian princely tomb of Arzhan 2 in Tuva (South Siberia) by focusing on tool marks and surface morphologies in order to analyze the variety of techniques—including, for instance, lost-wax casting, chasing, pressing, engraving, filigree, and granulation—that were employed to craft elaborate jewelry, decorated weapons, and other personal ornaments (Armbruster and Meyer 2024). Despite the impressive range of products in evidence, none of the techniques would have required permanent, large-scale facilities. The tools and methods used were versatile and adaptable, allowing the artisans to produce both lightweight gold decorations and solid, functional objects facilitating equestrian mobility, such as open-work fasteners, sliders, strap ends, and handles. Lifantii reviews direct archeological evidence for local jewelry production at Scythian sites in the northern Black Sea region by focusing on punches, matrices, and workshop remains recorded in excavations (Lifantii 2023). The presence of such tools indicates a high level of goldsmithing skill and challenges the longstanding bias in scholarship that views most gold objects from Scythian contexts as imported rather than locally produced. Finally, Leonid

Babenko's wide-ranging discussion of recent research on the gold pectoral from Tovsta Mohyla brings out the sophisticated adaptation of metalworking techniques to the needs of mobile ways of life (Babenko 2023). The use of hollow pseudo-torques (ornamental twisted rods) that mimic the appearance of heavier, solid gold jewelry demonstrates a sophisticated approach to balancing the demands of esthetics and practicality. The open-work decorative motifs and figure scenes evoking pastoral life also resonate with mobile contexts by conveying cultural stories and values that can be displayed in different settings, whether social gatherings, rituals, or during travels.

3.2. Cultural Identity and Interaction

Material culture offers many potential avenues to explore how mobile groups maintained their identity, status, and connectivity. Two articles in our volume illuminate in surprising ways how specific object types can bring out the changing facets of Scythian social organization and regional connections. First, Denis Topal provides an in-depth examination of the ceremonial forms of swords and daggers decorated with precious metals, which occupy a special place in the culture of the Iron Age nomads (Topal 2024). Based on the chronological distribution of the 76 examples he studied, Topal documents a strong interest in such status items in the third quarter of the fourth century BCE—a phase of growing competition and instability among the Scythian elites of the northern Black Sea region. The material also reveals regional differences. In the northern Black Sea area, most ceremonial swords were covered with gold overlays with relief decoration, whereas further east, the metalworking techniques were more varied, including gilding, wire decoration, gold inlay, and figural applications. The persistent preference for comparably short blades more suited for thrusting than cutting underscores the ceremonial characteristic of the weapons and the Scythians' reliance in combat on mounted archery rather than swords. Second, Marina Daragan and Sergei Polin explore the multifaceted role of axes in Scythian burial practices by shedding light on the objects' practical utility and symbolic significance (Daragan and Polin 2023). Their research reassesses several unusual burial contexts in the northern Black Sea region with axe depositions showing that the objects were employed in rituals before the excavation of the graves, during their backfilling and in the final sealing of the constructions. Ethnographic parallels from other Eurasian cultures reveal that axes often symbolized a connection between the physical and supernatural worlds and were thought to protect the living from the spirits of the dead and to facilitate the deceased's journey to the afterlife. This differential usage underscores the axes' importance beyond that of functional tools or weapons and reflects the cultural connections, belief systems, and hierarchical structure of Scythian society.

Interactions between mobile and sedentary communities are often examined through material exchanges, such as imported goods found at archeological sites or objects that indicate contact and influence. For instance, Iryna Shramko's contribution concentrates on the funeral costume of elite women in the northern Pontic forest-steppe (Shramko 2024). Based on recent discoveries in the Skorobir necropolis at the Bilsk fortified settlement in Ukraine, Shramko offers a new reconstruction of a costume previously identified in finds from Syniavka and Bobrytsa. Consisting of a gold-decorated headdress, necklaces of semi-precious stones, and other accessories, the repertoire hints at a stable tradition of women's dress persisting for much of the sixth century BCE and evolving at the fulcrum of long-distance interactions with West Asian and Pontic Greek centers as well as the Hallstatt polities of central Europe. The western connections of mobile steppe elites take center stage in Louis Nebelsick's re-examination of the celebrated Witaszkowo/Vettersfelde hoard from Poland through the lens of the dramatic shifts in population density and habitation patterns in eastern central Europe that have become ever more pronounced in archeological contexts of the second half of the sixth century BCE (Nebelsick 2024). Following the re-excavation of the hoard's original archeological site in the early 2000s, Nebelsick interprets the assemblage as a votive deposited according to local ritual traditions. At the same time, the "bilingual" nature of the artifacts fuses nomadic weapons and jewelry types with West

Asian figural conventions in ways that suggest prolonged cultural interchange between Scythian patrons and Ionian craftspeople. Drawing on a wide range of contextual evidence, Nebelsick posits that the hoard reached its destination as a diplomatic gift to a local leader who acted as a mediator in Scythian slaving operations beyond the fringes of the western Eurasian steppe. His analysis highlights the complexity of nomadic interactions and the far-reaching consequences of their westward incursions.

Finally, two articles illuminate the interactions between mobile and settled societies from the perspective of the cities of the Bosporan Kingdom on the shores of the Kerch Straits. Michał Halamus first explores the use of tamga signs in Bosporan inscriptions of the second and third centuries CE (Halamus 2024). Introduced to the northern Pontic steppe by Sarmatian nomads of the second or first century BCE, tamgas were originally adopted into the Greek epigraphic culture of the Bosporan cities to mark ownership or presence. Halamus details the evolution of these signs from their use as secondary markings on jewelry and weapons to their appearance on coins and stone stelae, often as significant elements of civic self-representation and royal propaganda to convey messages of power, identity, and cultural participation in the Bosporan Kingdom. Second, Joanna Porucznik and Evgenia Velychko reassess an elite child burial discovered in 1953 in the necropolis of Panticapaeum at modern-day Kerch (Porucznik and Velychko 2024). They examine its contents in relation to the social dynamics and shifting interplay of Greek and non-Greek influences between the fourth century BCE and the second century CE. The presence of adult-size items—such as a gold torque with a carnelian intaglio, a bracelet typical of late Scythian sites, and an inscribed finger ring—points to the ascribed elite status of the deceased child and to a level of visibility and social standing of sub-adults previously uncharacteristic of Bosporan society. Integrating this material with debates in childhood studies, the authors identify the mortuary commemoration of children as a newly evolved medium for articulating ideas of loss, family continuity, and identity that was relied upon by Greek as well as non-Greek elite families.

3.3. Environmental Adaptation

Another area that attracts special attention in the study of nomadic mobility is the ways in which material culture enables and reflects environmental adaptation, such as the selection and processing of natural resources, the modes of constructing tools and dwellings, and the maintenance of seasonal installations along migration routes dictated by ecological conditions and grazing needs. Karen Rubinson and Katheryn Linduff examine the unique socio-political and economic structures of the Pazyryk culture of the fifth to third centuries BCE as an adaptive strategy to the challenging landscape and climate of the Altai-Sayan mountain system in South Siberia (Rubinson and Linduff 2024). They argue that the hierarchical organization usually foregrounded in the literature on the basis of the stratified wealth in tombs offers an incomplete picture of the social organizations that underpinned these herding communities. The variety of occupational tasks in Pazyrykian daily life—including herding, craftwork, trading, hunting, felting, food preparation, childcare, and warfare—required a multiplicity of skills and knowledge that called for ad hoc leadership arranged along heterarchical as opposed to hierarchical principles. The ability to shift between organizational modes allowed local communities to thrive in this harsh and confined environment and hints at the immense range of mobile ways of life that existed in the broader ecoregion. James Johnson's contribution also deals with the multivalence of nomad burial mounds (Johnson 2024). Although these mounds are usually seen as symbols of a rigid, patriarchal society, Johnson argues that such views of Scythian kurgans are overly simplistic and influenced by Greek and Persian preconceptions of the northern nomads as barbarians. Combining Geographic Information Systems with an original theoretical framework inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination (Bakhtin 1981), the author shows how viewshed analyses of kurgan landscapes can reveal the multiple ways of experiencing the monuments, depending on the age, gender, and cultural background of the mobile viewer. By examining burial mounds through this expanded methodology, Johnson

provides a deeper understanding of Scythian mortuary landscapes and their implications for current approaches to ancient societies within and beyond the Eurasian steppe.

As the articles in this collection demonstrate, material culture holds many potential insights into the everyday lives, social structures, and values of nomadic peoples. By studying material culture, we can shed light not only on the practical aspects of life, such as the need for adaptable tools and possessions, but also on the symbolic role that material engagement plays in rituals and social ceremonies. Paying greater attention to objects and monuments helps us appreciate the complexity and richness of mobile communities and challenges the age-old view of such groups as merely transient or peripheral. In recognizing the limiting constraints of textual sources, we come to acknowledge how mobility fostered innovation, cultural exchange, and identity formation and to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of human history.

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