

RETHINKING CENTRAL ASIA:  
A REVIEW OF *THE AGE OF THE STEPPE WARRIORS*

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Christoph Baumer. *The History of Central Asia: The Age of the Steppe Warriors*.  
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The goal of this book and the three volumes which are to follow is to provide an overview of the history of Central Asia and to reveal long term trends and complex, interdisciplinary connections. This includes the formation of a complete overarching picture, in an effort to bring to light previously unknown facts, contextualize them within broader developments, and to refine interpretations of the past. These are worthwhile goals for any volume, especially one about a region that, in the author's opinion, has a dearth of source material for prehistory. To accomplish this for a region as immense as Central Asia would challenge any scholar – there is, in fact, a huge literature which must be mastered. It is not surprising then to find that the author was not always successful in meeting his goals.

Baumer brings to the task a broad range of experience in travel throughout the region, professional skills as a photographer, and an already extensive record of publication about various aspects of the history and cultures. Among the outstanding features of the book are its well thought-out organization, accompanied by wonderful photography and informative graphics, all published in lavish, large format. Baumer juxtaposes discussions of archaeological data and modern photos of "nomads," providing the reader an ethnographic perspective that highlights some of the continuities of cultures and lifeways in portions of Central Asia. An important emphasis is on the diversity of material cultures. The book thus has the ability to draw in new readers who are unfamiliar with the material cultures and prehistoric developments of Central Asia.

The volume opens with an overview of the geography and climate of Central Asia that includes excursions on the palaeontological evidence (for example, the fossils discovered by Roy Chapman Andrews) and a

discussion about the impact of geography and climate on history. Subsequent chapters are ordered sequentially from the Paleolithic through the Iron Age, with a final chapter focusing on the Greeks in Central Asia. Within each chapter is a detailed discussion of a chosen topic which highlights either a scholar, an archaeological site, or a specific theory. Examples include a discussion of the development of the bow, an examination of two remarkable petroglyph sites in the Mongolian Altai, a spotlight on Raphael Pumpelly (the pioneering excavator at Anau in today's Turkmenistan, and an excursus on the significance of deer stones). The underlying themes of the book are climate and its effect on humans, economics and trade, warfare, and burial customs.

In highlighting some of the most pressing issues in the archaeology of Central Asia, Baumer skillfully paints with a broad brush evidence from the archaeological record. Yet a spotlight on long-term trends often means that details and nuances are lost in discussions of this vast landscape. The author rightly notes that Central Asia is a broad, sparsely populated region of extremes. But just as variability is present in terms of climate, geology, and landscapes, there is also extreme variation in the degree of archaeological research and languages of publication in each of the respective countries. These issues present significant problems in the study of any single micro-region within Central Asia, and they intensify when the vast landscape of all of Central Asia is chosen as the unit of analysis. Scholars investigating this region, and who wish to account for the full corpus of data and most recent excavations and interpretations, must engage with the detailed local literature, in a host of different languages, coming from within this vast region. Baumer has clearly engaged with much of the literature produced by scholars in Europe and America on

the region but fails to incorporate important studies published in the region itself which have a bearing on the broader conjectures and conclusions and which underlie some of the newer analytical concepts which are transforming our understanding of Central Asia. For example, in discussions of the Eurasian steppe, semantics have begun to move beyond “nomads” as an all-encompassing category and toward investigations of degrees of mobility and multiplicities evident in the subsistence and economic regimes of pastoral societies (Cribb 1991; Chang and Koster 1994; Tkacheva 1999; Frachetti 2002; Anthony et al. 2005; Popova 2006; Frachetti and Mar’yashev 2007; Frachetti 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Frachetti and Benecke 2009; Hanks and Linduff 2009; Hanks 2010; Spengler et al. 2013; Ventresca Miller et al. forthcoming). These new directions of scholarship, including a focus on animal domestication, as well as pastoral and agro-pastoral economies (Hanks 2010), affect not only our interpretations of known data but, more importantly, shape the agendas of new fieldwork and the resulting data.

There is a tendency here to rely heavily on syntheses regarding different regions within Central Asia. But such works have often already glossed over much of the variability present in local micro-regions, and therefore do not qualify as good primary source material. In addition, there is a distinct focus not on the entirety of archaeological material, but on particular objects of material culture from an art historical perspective. This is especially problematic for discussions of social and cultural development when earlier periods of prehistory are addressed, and it explains why broad gaps are evident for certain regions discussed in the volume. For example, the appendix (pp. 308–09) aims to list the most important prehistoric and early historic cultures, but contains empty boxes for the Neolithic through Early Bronze Age across areas for which there is ample data available in local publications – eastern Kazakhstan, Minusinsk, Tuva, the Mongolian Altai, and Xinjiang.

Finally, there is a continued discussion of theories that resemble coherent myths – ideas and issues which many regional scholars have long since abandoned. These include discussion of the origins of the Indo-European language and homeland (for a critical analysis see Hanks 2001), intensive migrations (see Frachetti 2011), as well as any allusions to “mythical” peoples such as Amazonian warrior women (see p. 264). Scholars working in the region have repeatedly questioned these notions that have plagued Central Asian studies and have, in most cases, moved beyond these issues.

To illustrate the above-noted problems, I shall focus on the material of Chapter VI, which correlates

with my own research on the Bronze Age of northern Kazakhstan. Many studies of this core region of Central Asia paint broad and convincing pictures of its peoples, societies, and cultures. Yet from my perspective, the archaeological cultures of the Bronze Age Eurasian steppe are best compared to an impressionist painting. From far away the picture is one of crisp and distinct elements, allowing for easy discussions of separate entities. But up close, the crisp lines are decisively blurred, distinct elements break down, and the diversity of every daub of paint becomes visible.

The only way to remedy hindered perspectives of prehistoric Central Asia, such as those presented in Chapter VI, is to pay attention to the details and even seeming contradictions of the archaeological record by engrossing oneself in the minutiae of regional knowledge that is available. For example, Baumer discusses the separation of two Andronovo subcultures (Alakul’ and Fedorovo) based on mortuary rituals, and then cites authors who have undertaken comprehensive summaries of the available data (Frachetti 2008b; Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007). While these compendia do not highlight variation in the mortuary realm, they do discuss variability, which is glossed over by Baumer. Furthermore, when local data is accessed, it becomes clear that scholarly views on the Andronovo vary considerably. Currently, a separation of Andronovo subcultures is not possible based on cremation and inhumation practices, and many researchers note that these body treatments were used by both groups (Matveev 1997; Stefanov and Korochkova 2006, pp. 15, 18, 128–29; Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007, p. 127; Kuz’mina 2008, pp. 160, 170). Great diversity is also evident between the Alakul’ and Fedorovo subcultures based on burial construction. Which subculture had burial pits lined with wood? The answer depends on whom you ask, as scholars have stated that the Alakul’ (Korochkova and Stefanov 2004), Alakul’ and Fedorovo (Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007), or Fedorovo (Kuz’mina 2008) are buried within wooden enclosures (For critical discussion Ventresca Miller 2013, p. 162, Fig. 4.17). In order to move forward in the study of Central Asian history, we must present all the available data and question inherited narratives for the steppe. To create a compendium work that has longevity, it also would have been worthwhile for Baumer to engage with scholars working in the region to a greater degree. Furthermore, his sweeping perspective should provoke readers to explore the diversity of cultures, lifeways, and peoples in Central Asia, and look beyond generalizations about broad social and cultural processes in order to highlight individuals and local communities in the past.

The first installment of Baumer’s *The History of Cen-*

tral Asia is a volume worth its weight in gold in terms of images alone, many of which are unprecedented for the region. While the author may not have had access to all of the critical scientific literature, he clearly gained entry to many regions and collections that are rarely accessed by foreigners. In the case of the site of Ayala Mazar in Xinjiang (pp. 123–33), the photographs are astounding, but how they were captured raises significant questions. The photographs are evidence that mummified heads were moved from their original locations (p. 125), that wooden figures “found lying on the ground” (Baumer 2011, p. 63) were placed in standing positions and discussed as “re-erected wooden figures” (pp. 124, 128), and that some items may have been collected and photographed at a later date (p. 133). However, it is unclear whether Baumer had permission to excavate or was part of a scientific team, as no brief reports have appeared in local journals (*Xinjiang wenwu* 新疆文物 – *Xinjiang Cultural Relics*) or broader scientific journals (*Kaogu* 考古 – *Archaeology*) in China. Instead this significant discovery was published only as part of a paper given to the Royal Asiatic Society (Baumer 2011) and lacks the recognition usually given to scientific collaborators or institutions from China. The combination of these issues should give scholars pause to consider whether Baumer may have moved human remains or other artifacts at the site without permission, or disturbed the site in any manner (e.g. standing up wooden figures for a photo). Hopefully these allegations are not true, as they would seriously tarnish the reputation of the author as well as his affiliated organizations.

### About the author

**Alicia Ventresca Miller** received her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 2013. Her dissertation focused on understanding the Middle to Late Bronze Age transition in the central Eurasian steppe, a time when shifts in patterns of settlement and mortuary practice occurred. This work expanded our understandings of pastoral societies in northern Kazakhstan, especially the detailed nature of social and biological communities in the past. Alicia is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Graduate School of Human Development in Landscapes, Institute for Prehistory and Protohistoric Archaeology, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel. Her postdoctoral research investigates human and animal mobility during the Bronze Age in the central Eurasian steppe through stable isotopic analyses.

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