



Burial ritual, agriculture, and craft production among Bronze Age pastoralists at Tasbas (Kazakhstan)



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ABSTRACT

This article presents new archaeological research on the ritual and domestic life of pastoralists at the Bronze Age campsite Tasbas, Kazakhstan. We reconstruct the hitherto unrecorded economy of high mountain pastoralists who lived at the site from the mid-3rd to early 1st millennium B.C. We argue that within the broad dynamics of mountain pastoralism there is local variability as shown through multi-season residence, farming, and craft production. In bringing together multiple data sets to address how the site was used we 1) show that ceramics were locally produced with similar manufacture technology across eight centuries – which breaks significantly from the canonical cultural history and large-scale migration paradigms that have defined the regional archaeology for decades; 2) identify a new tradition of cremation ritual (3rd millennium B.C.), and; 3) present the earliest evidence (3rd millennium B.C.) for the local use of domesticated grains and then farming (2nd millennium B.C.) in northern Central Asia. We provide a unique case study to bear on debates concerning the relationship between long-term regional stability and technological innovations among early central Eurasian pastoralists.

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1. Introduction

Bronze Age Eurasian pastoral societies shaped wide-scale circulation of animal husbandry practices, bronze metallurgy, horse riding, and chariot technology across Eurasia (Frachetti, 2012; Hanks and Linduff, 2009; Mei, 2009). Pastoral migration unequivocally provided a key vector for the spread of these phenomena – although diverse interpretations surround their nature (e.g., Anthony, 2013; Frachetti, 2011). Conventional images of Bronze Age Eurasian pastoralists rely on proposed long-distance migrations across the Eurasian steppe terrain. This traditional paradigm is grounded in a long history of culture-historical studies of regional pottery assemblages (and material classes such as metal objects) (Anthony, 2008; Kuz'mina, 2007) attempting to identify the time and place of regional cultural formations (Koryakova and Epimakhov, 2007).

More recent archeological studies of settlement complexes in central Eurasia present a different view of pastoralist mobility, technological innovation, and subsistence (Frachetti, 2008; Hanks and Doonan, 2009; Rouse and Cerasetti, 2013). For example, growing archeological evidence from mountain, steppe, and desert contexts illustrate diverse forms of pastoralism that incorporated varied forms of mobility and diets supplemented with farming, fishing, foraging, and/or hunting (Bendrey, 2011; Murphy et al., 2013; Spengler et al., 2013a; Miller et al., 2014). The diversity of 'pastoral' economies evident across Eurasia not only highlights the growing need for robust and detailed descriptions of how Bronze Age groups made a living, but also the need to understand changes in technology and craft production, their manner of integration into local domestic and ritual life, and their transmission at wider scales.

This article provides a case example for the relationship among seasonal activities of craft production and subsistence, mobility, and site use among Bronze Age food producers of the Dzhungar Mountains, Semirech'ye, in Kazakhstan (Fig. 1). Standard archeological interpretations of its Bronze Age society and economy describe small pastoral groups who practiced short-distance vertical transhumance between winter and summer camps – a model both developed from archeological data and ethnographic analogies to central Eurasian pastoralists (Frachetti, 2008). The greatest (permanent) architectural investment and material remains are found at elevations below

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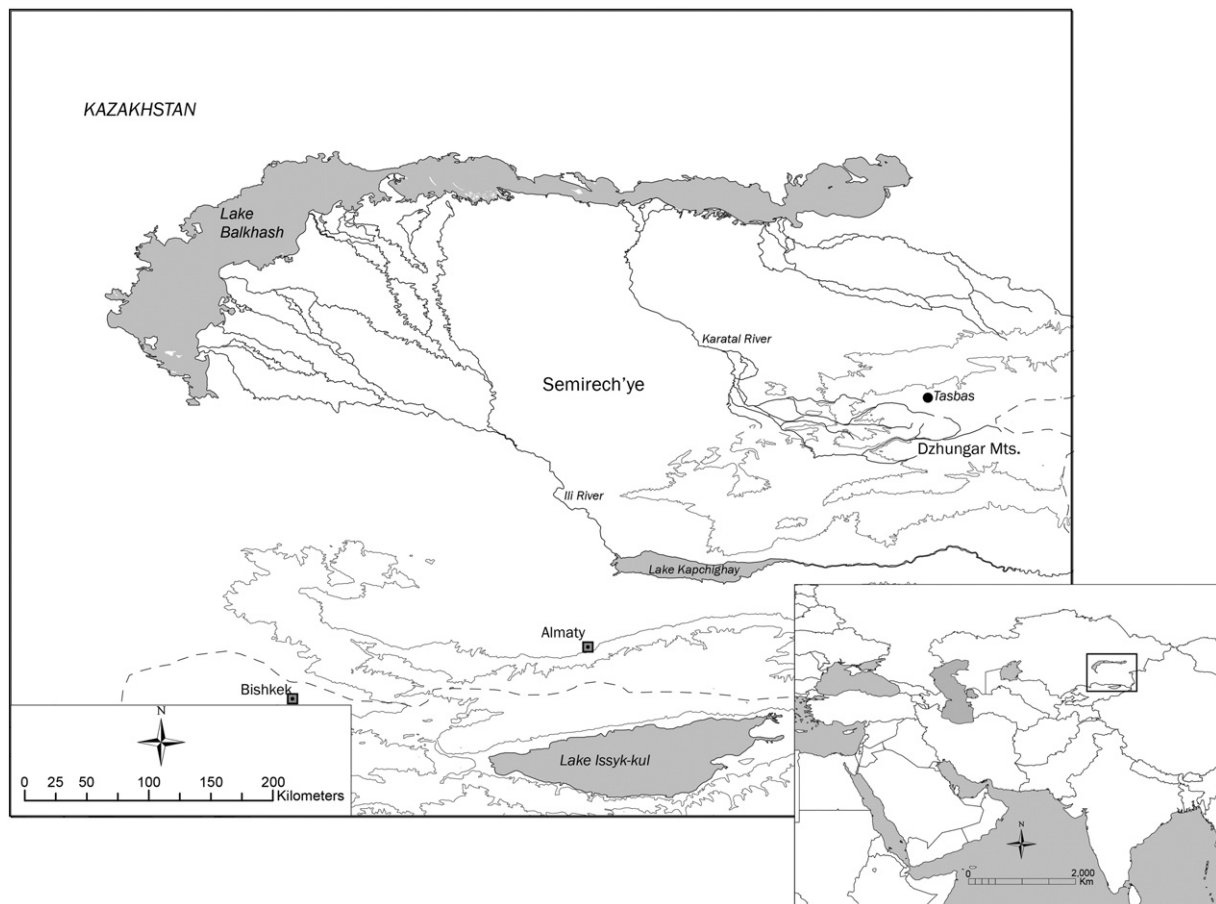


Fig. 1. Map of Semirech'ye showing the Dzhungar Mountains with location of Tasbas.

1000 m. asl whereas sites at higher elevations may have contained more temporary shelters making them difficult for archeologists to locate. Settlement archeology along its lower mountain foothills (<1000 m. asl) has also yielded more detailed reconstructions of presumed winter activity where animal husbandry was the dominant economic strategy, with little to no investment in crop agriculture (e.g., [Frachetti and Mar'yashev, 2007](#); [Frachetti et al., 2010a](#); [Rogozhinsky, 2011](#)). Less archeological excavation has focused on higher elevation campsites thus, to date, limited comparative data exists for relating summer and

winter practices of Bronze Age groups, or at the very least the different lifestyles practiced across the piedmont zone (but see [Panyushkina et al., 2010](#)).

Here we present archeological data from Tasbas, a recently excavated highland settlement ([Fig. 1](#)) located at 1500 m asl, in the Bayan-Zhurek Valley of Semirech'ye. The valley is flanked to its east by the forested and snow capped Dzhungar Alatau and to its west by a chain of basalt outcrops and granite formations that shelter numerous flat ravine terraces along their southern edge. Permanent rivers, seasonal streams, and river



Fig. 2. Natural setting around Tasbas, Byan-Zhurek Valley, Semirech'ye.

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