Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 32 (2013) 449–477

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaa

The fruits of migration: Understanding the 'longue dureé' and the socio-economic relations of the Early Transcaucasian Culture

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 February 2012
Revision received 25 April 2013
Available online 7 September 2013

Keywords:
Near East
Early Bronze Age
Transcaucasia
Alcohol
Viticulture
Settlement patterns
Identity
Diaspora communities

ABSTRACT

The appearance of the Early Transcaucasian Culture (ETC) across large portions of the Near East in the 3rd millennium BC is commonly cited as one of the best archaeologically documented and broadly studied cases of a prehistoric migration. This study uses the ETC to develop a model of what happens when migrants move into regions that are already inhabited by emerging or complex societies. In particular, this study focuses on how immigrant populations can integrate themselves into indigenous communities in a physical, socio-political and economic sense, and how a migrant group's identity can be constructed and maintained alongside these indigenous communities.

Multiple lines of evidence, including settlement patterns, ceramic evidence and textual records, are used to postulate an economic niche for the ETC in viti- and viniculture, which has a long recorded history in Transcaucasia, commonly regarded as the place of origin of the ETC. The production of a consumable high status commodity such as wine by ETC immigrants provided them with the socioeconomic status that allowed them to maintain their social identity in an archaeologically visible manner in their new homelands for extended periods of time. Furthermore, the increased production of wine provided by the immigrants eventually changes the availability of this commodity and transforming its use and transforms its consumption in North Syrian societies.

Introduction

Mobility in one form or another has played an important role in human existence. From the movement of hominids out of Africa, to the spread of agriculture, and the development of long-distance trade, communities have negotiated great distances in our early history. Invoking these 'movements' as an explanatory mechanism for the spread of a historical or archaeological 'culture' is one of the oldest and most persistent themes in historical and archaeological reconstructions; yet, as ubiquitous as migrations are, the study of the role that they play in cultural change has a rather untidy history in archaeological studies. Early in the history of this discipline, cultural historical approaches generally understood the spatial translation of an archaeological 'culture' as a result of the movement of individual carriers having traversed from one region to the next. Unfortunately, such facile interpretations have been exploited on several occasions, sometimes with appalling consequences.[1] In reaction to these abuses, the use of migration as an explanation of cultural change and popularity of has vacillated in archaeological and anthropological literature (Adams, 1978; Adams et al., 1978; Anthony, 1990, 1992, 1997; Chapman and Hamerow, 1997; Batiuk, 2005; Burmeister, 2000; Brettell, 2008; Brettell and Hollifield, 2008: 19–21). Underlying many of the debates, however, have been valid criticisms of the methodological approaches used to identify and understand migrations in the archaeological record (Todd, 1973; Adams et al., 1978; Chapman and Dolukhanov, 1992), many of which have only recently begun to be addressed. Building on studies by geographers and demographers, we have now begun to understand migrations as a patterned human behaviour or social strategy, and have made important advances in identifying potential methods for determining where changes in material culture are truly the result of ancient migrations, rather than the result of emulation, diffusion or trade (see Anthony, 1997; Burmeister, 2000; Brettell and Hollifield, 2008). These preliminary achievements aside, there are still fundamentally larger unaddressed questions in the examination of ancient migrations. While in some cases we have begun to understand the structure of migrations [the 'how' and perhaps even the 'why' a given migration might have occurred], we have yet to really address what happens to migrants *after* they have settled in a new region. More specifically, there has been minimal discussion of what happens when migrants move into regions that are already inhabited by emerging or complex societies (Greenberg and Goren,

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[1] The unabashed exploitation of Kossina's *Die Herkunft der Germanen* (1911) and *Die Deutsche Vorgeschichte* (1912) as the cornerstone of the Nazi ideology had a profound effect on the use of migration in theoretical discussions. Part of the retreat from migration theory in the following generation of scholars can be seen as an attempt by the field to insulate itself as far as possible from this politicized intellectual history.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2013.08.002

2009; Paz, 2009; Yasur-Landau, 2010; van Dommelen, 2002), and in particular, how these immigrant populations are integrated into the indigenous communities, not merely in the physical sense, but also from a social, political and economic point of view as well. Although discussions on how migrant group identity is constructed and maintained is finally emerging (Paz, 2009; Bernardini, 2005 and to an extent Yasur-Landau, 2010), investigations into how cultural assimilation of migrant groups may or may not occur, is an important avenue of investigation that is generally taken for granted, and presently lacks sufficient discussion in archaeological literature (van Dommelen, 2005), even though it has been examined by sociologists and demographers for almost a hundred years (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918; Gordon, 1964; Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes et al., 2005; Waters and Jiménez, 2005). The distribution of the Early Transcaucasian Culture (henceforth ETC), is broadly accepted to be one of our best archaeologically documented, as well as one of the most studied cases of a prehistoric migration (Batiuk, 2005; Batiuk and Rothman, 2007; Greenberg and Goren, 2009; Kelly-Buccellati, 1979; Kohl, 2009; Kushnareva, 1997; Rothman, 2004; Sagona, 1984), and therefore provides an ideal venue in which to explore these processes.

Two main models have dominated any discussion of the economic activities of the ETC: pastoral nomadism and trade in metals, and these two models have formed the explanatory basis for the mechanics of the purported ETC migrations. Given the huge chronological and geographical expanse in which this 'culture' is found, imposing two overriding models on such a complex web of interactions is a highly simplistic approach. This is not to deny that pastoral-nomadism or trade in metals did not play a part in the movements of the people bearing the ETC culture in the Near East, only to suggest that it may not have played a part in the success and longevity of settlement of the ETC in their new 'homelands'. Groups can migrate for one reason, but can remain and be successful in an area for different reasons. The questions that must be pursued are: how would these new groups integrate into their new home lands not only socially, but economically? In a period which sees the development of regional state societies, and the growth of more integrated and monolithic material cultures, how would they be able to resist assimilation? It is with this general framework of examining the maintenance of group identities in their new migrant communities' *vis-à-vis* assimilation, that I re-examine the ETC population of southeastern Anatolia and northern Syria, in particular investigating the role their subsistence economy may have played, and come to a new understanding of the Early Transcaucasian Phenomenon. In this vein, I would propose, in the case of northwestern Syria, that the ETC was involved in the production of wine, which provided it with a unique economic niche in which to integrate at a macro scale into the communities where they settled, while remaining economically but more importantly, culturally independent. *Viti*- and *vini*-culture (grape cultivation and wine production), which have a long history in the Caucasus, would have provided the migrants with a unique skill set and economic advantage through production of a high status commodity – wine – which would have been in demand among the local elites of the region at a critical point in the development of regional complex societies. Although wine production may not have been introduced into the migrant regions by the ETC, these groups may have played a role in its development as an industry and in increasing its demand, particularly among the emergent local elites, and eventually in the population at large in northwestern Syria in the Early Bronze Age.

The ETC phenomenon

The Early Bronze (EB) Age (c. 3400–2000 BC) is one of the most active and dynamic periods of social development in the history of the Near East. During this period we witness the flowering of urbanism and elite social structures that shape socio-political institutions of the region for millennia to follow. At the same time, we see the appearance of the ETC, a unique and highly distinctive archaeological culture, which had developed out of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures of Transcaucasia – more specifically the Kura and Araxes river basin located in the modern Republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Sagona, 1984).[2] Its most recognizable material culture signature is a hand-made, heavily slipped and burnished pottery type. This pottery is decorated with ribbing or incision and is often, but not exclusively, fired to produce a striking red and black colour combination (Palumbi, 2003, 2008; Batiuk, 2005; Sagona, 1984). The ETC cultural horizon is also association with distinctive architectural features (rectangular and circular houses of both mudbrick and/or wattle and daub), along with portable or fixed hearths sometimes decorated with anthropomorphic features, arsenical bronze working, bone implements, bovine animal figurines, and obsidian-based chipped stone tool industries. This ETC material culture signature is found in a large arc within the Near East, spanning from Iran to the Republic of Georgia, through Eastern Anatolia and North Syria, into the southern Levant (Fig. 1).

Despite a broad geographical distribution, its "...high degree of regionalism should not be underestimated" (Sagona and Zimansky, 2010: 163). Consequently, the ETC material culture signature (Burney and Lang, 1971) has been 'discovered' numerous times and given an unwieldy number of regional names, including Kura-Araxes Culture in Transcaucasia, Yanik Culture in Iran, Karaz Culture in Eastern Anatolia, Red Black Burnished Ware Culture (RBBW) in north-western Syria, and Khirbet Kerak Ware Culture (KKW) in Israel/Palestine. Furthermore, where this material culture appears outside of the Caucasian "homeland", it tends to resides side-by-side with the indigenous cultures, in a pattern of co-residency, and maintains this pattern for a significant period of time with each retaining its own cultural distinctiveness (Batiuk, 2005; Batiuk and Rothman, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2006).

Early research on the ETC focused on how to explain both its presence and distribution (Amiran, 1951; Hood, 1951; Lamb, 1954; Burney, 1958; Hennessy, 1967; Todd, 1973). What did the extensive distribution of this archaeological phenomenon, best identified by a distinctive type of pottery, represent? Was it a culture in the Childean sense? Was it truly an example of 'Pots Equal People' (Kramer, 1977)? Interpretations of the ETC phenomenon have altered over time, keeping in tune with changes in archaeological theory. For example, Leonard Woolley saw the appearance of the ETC as evidence for "an outpouring of barbarians from the north ... armed invaders who massacred the old inhabitants" (1953: 31–37). With the appearance of Processual Archaeology, archaeologists explored individual causal mechanisms, such as contact through long-distance trade, cultural diffusion, or emulation of material culture traits (Todd, 1973). More recently,

[2] The chronology and locus of the development of the ETC is very much under scrutiny at present and must be acknowledged to be constructed on frustratingly little hard chronological data. Kuftin (1941) originally assigned the development of the ETC to the "Eneolithic" (Chalcolithic) period, however later scholars recalibrated its origins to the Late Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age, beginning c. 3500 BCE. Based on his excavations at Sos Höyük, Sagona argued for the initial development of the ETC to be earlier in the Chalcolithic, and the locus of its development, originating in eastern Anatolia, and later diffusing eastward along the Kura River into the south Caucasus (Kiguradze and Sagona, 2003; Sagona, 2004). Palumbi, has vociferously argued for the larger and earlier role of Eastern and even *Central* Anatolia suggesting that the development of the ETC material cultural signature, in particular the red-black colour combination began in Central Anatolia and reached the Caucasus only by the end of the 4th Millennium (2003: 103–105; 2008: 43–44). Recent work by Marro at Ovçular Tepesi in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan has identified ETC material, complete with red-black pottery, from a secure deposit radiocarbon dated to the 5th millennium, refuting Palumbi's and Sagona's reconstructions and redirecting the locus of development to Transcaucasia (2011: 66).