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## Inner Asian polities and their built environment

J. Daniel Rogers

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, NHB 112, PO Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013-7012, USA

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## ABSTRACT

By 200 BCE the eastern steppe regions centered on Mongolia saw the development of expansive and complex political systems usually referred to as empires. The origins of these polities and the processes of consolidation can be described within the concept of a political community, reflecting the actions of competing groups in expansive social network. For Inner Asia, community was linked to issues of mobility, dispersed control hierarchies, and the economics of multi-resource pastoralism. Together, these patterns offer an alternative vision of the origin and operation of early complex polities. Archaeologically, the pastoralist way of using the built environment provides a window into the dynamics of political processes that operated within a particular polity, but also within multiple polities across long stretches of time. Based on a sample of 76 sites within 13 steppe polities several patterns emerge that highlight how distinctive political processes altered and incorporated community and place in the building of fortified settlements, palaces, military posts, and other constructions. The evidence from these places suggests that these polities operated as inclusive spatial networks that relied more on mobility than the direct interactions seen in urban centers in sedentary societies. The urban centers of the steppe tended to be the byproduct of polity formation, rather than the source.

## 1. Introduction

Archaeological and documentary research in Inner Asia (Mongolia and surrounding portions of northern China, Kazakhstan, and southern Russia) provides extensive evidence for the development of polities organized as states and empires. These polities had as their base a mixed herd pastoralist economy refined over the previous 2000 years. The evidence from these polities suggests alternative ways of viewing the emergence of complex social systems, contrasting with more sedentary polities that relied on intensive agriculture (Alizadeh, 2010; Bondarenko, 2007; Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, 2006; Kradin, 2011; Rogers, 2012). Most theories about the rise, sustainability, and collapse of states and empires have focused on sedentary agricultural polities. Within concepts of the state and neo-evolutionary theory the pastoralist polities are generally viewed as exceptions or as secondary phenomenon (Barfield, 2001; Ferguson and Mansbach, 1996:10). New archaeological research and reanalyzed ethnographic evidence, however, makes it increasingly difficult to exclude pastoralists from basic interpretations of emerging social and political complexity (Borgerhoff Mulder et al., 2010; Lindsay and Greene, 2013).

The objective of this study is to further develop theories of early state formation by providing data and analysis of an important component of pastoralist polities. The focal strategy is analysis of the role of urban centers and other constructions in the development and maintenance of complex pastoralist polities. The geographical focus is

Mongolia with selected examples from surrounding regions. In general, unlike sedentary polities in India (Sinopoli, 2006; Smith, 2003a, 2003b), Mesopotamia (Stone, 1995), Mesoamerica (Nichols and Charlton, 1997), or in other regions urban centers and other constructions served less as central places in the emergence of complexity and more as by-products of a dispersed political landscape focused on mobility and movable tent communities. The analysis uses a three-stage approach. The first stage reviews the evidence from an extensive sample of architecture derived from 13 different polities that controlled the steppe over a 1600 year period. The second stage then analyzes the social and political components of a political landscape of competing and cooperating ethnic and corporate groups. Finally, the functions of the architectural remains are compared with the documentary evidence to develop an interpretation of the distinctive uses of architecture by the steppe polities and the implications in the broader context of early complex polities.

The large polities that emerged on the eastern steppe during the Late Iron Age after 200 BCE have their foundations in the Central Asian Bronze Age (3500–1200 BCE) and Early Iron Age (1200–300 BCE) and in the corresponding periods in Inner Asia (3000–700 BCE and 700–400 BCE respectively). Hanks (2010) describes the transition from the Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age as occurring over an extended period from 1200–300 BCE. Extensive ongoing research in Bronze Age archaeology provides examples of emerging power differentials and related monumentality associated with socio-political systems usually

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described as chiefdoms (e.g. Drennan et al., 2011; Hanks, 2010:471; Kovalev and Erdenebaatar, 2009). To the west in Central Asia (from Kazakhstan west to the Ukraine), villages were a common feature of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age, along with the extensive use of large burial mounds (kurgans) as monumental cultural focal points on the landscape (Chang, 2008; Kislenco and Tatarintseva, 1999; Kohl, 2007). Further east, in Inner Asia, however, domestic and public buildings were almost nonexistent for these periods. Instead, there was a focus on large burial mounds associated with population concentrations (Houle, 2009, 2010) and other natural features or monuments, such as deer stones (Fitzhugh, 2009).

Whether or not villages were present, the social organization of the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age across the steppe environments of Central and Inner Asia were dominated by political systems similar to chiefdoms, with hereditary leadership. Given the cultural diversity evident in the material record and the variability in economic systems documented by numerous projects, it is likely that a complex landscape of large and small political units existed across a vast region (Anthony, 2009; Frachetti, 2009; Chang, 2008; Kohl, 2007). In this kind of social landscape the potential was present for the emergence of larger-scale complex polities, similar to states described elsewhere in the world.

By the end of the Early Iron Age in eastern Inner Asia permanent constructions were built that correlate with other lines of evidence for expanding strategies of statecraft. Around 200 BCE the first of the major steppe polities, the Xiongnu, consolidated control over a large region (approximately 4,000,000 km<sup>2</sup>). The Xiongnu were the first significant steppe threat to the Chinese states and were the subject of significant reports by the Chinese imperial historians. The architectural constructions built by the Xiongnu polity were also the first on the eastern steppe. Earlier Bronze Age cultures did not build permanent architecture as living spaces or for defensive purposes. The use of architecture continued to a greater or lesser degree across a history of 13 major pastoralist polities stretching into modern times (Fig. 1). Over this 1600 year history not all constructions were part of urban centers, but many were. Because most were relatively small, the concept of urban center as used here does not automatically imply a city. Cities are urban centers with a scale of population often estimated at several thousand plus, although contemporary scholarship seldom refers to a specific

demographic level (e.g. Marcus and Sabloff, 2008; Storey, 2006; Yoffee, 2005:43). The Uighur capital of Ordu Balik (ca. CE 740–840) is the only steppe settlement that easily fits the demographic criteria of a city (Rogers, 2012). However, in Central Asia, beyond the scope of this study, there are steppe urban centers of a relatively large scale (Khazanov, 2005). Rather than scale as the principal defining characteristic, the focus here is on function. Most archaeological literature on urban centers identifies specialized functions in service to a wider region as well as sources of social power as key criteria (Adams, 1966; Bairoch, 1988; Morkot, 2001:237; Stone, 1995; Trigger, 2003:120). Those specialized functions most notably included administration, elite residences, military coordination, craft production, markets, religious establishments, and monuments in support of political and symbolic functions (Adams, 1966; Bairoch, 1988). Steppe urban centers routinely supplied these functions (Rogers et al., 2005). The functions of the urban centers should also be considered in the dynamics of how places functioned within a broader social dynamic that included the emergence of councils and alternative sources of power (Yoffee, 2016).

The earth and stone architecture of the pastoralist polities existed alongside movable tent communities. Mobility of residence on the steppe was an abiding principal that was nevertheless linked with traditions of place. For example, several polities, including the Uighurs, Turk II, and Mongols followed a tradition of major constructions in the Orkhon Valley of central Mongolia (Scott, 1975). All of these included open spaces within defensive walls that could have supported substantial tent communities. Several examples are presented below. The style of architecture and the construction methods varied, but predominantly consisted of rammed earth or mud bricks as the basic elements. In some instances fired bricks were also used, especially in temples and palaces. Both of the primary methods were widely utilized in Central and Inner Asia, as well as in many other regions of the World. The exterior defensive walls were often several meters thick at the base. In several instances these walls incorporated wooden beams for internal structure and points of attachment for ancillary buildings. Public buildings often had tiled roofs and floors. Floor plans for these buildings show similarities with China and Central Asian designs, but also western sources (Becker, 2013; Dars, 1972; Khvichia, 2012). Ordinary domestic buildings typically had roofs supported by wooden beams. When it was available stone was used for construction of defensive and building walls.

The evidence for pastoralist social organization and economic practice is difficult to study archaeologically because tent-based settlement systems typically leave few traces (Cribb, 1991). Recent studies at the household-level of settlement systems, however, are bringing large quantities of new information to light from intensive systematic surveys (Clark, 2014; Gardner, 2016; Houle, 2010; Honeychurch et al., 2007). The more permanent buildings and other constructions now serve as a complementary source of information, rather than as the only source. With the recent advent of full coverage survey there is an increasing body of settlement data related to individual pastoralist camps to supplement information from the relatively few walled settlements (Gardner, 2016:164–177).

## 2. The sites

The principal data used in this study is derived from architectural and site organization details for a sample of 76 sites that incorporate stone or earthen architecture. The sites are listed in Table 1 with additional details. Site locations are shown on the regional map in Fig. 2. Sites were selected for this study primarily because they have been dated, mapped, and there is either published information or direct field observation of the characteristics. In no way is the site sample meant to be comprehensive of all Inner Asian sites with built architecture. The author and colleagues from the Smithsonian visited 31 of the sites in the sample and accumulated mapping data and other information over the course of four field seasons in Inner Asia.

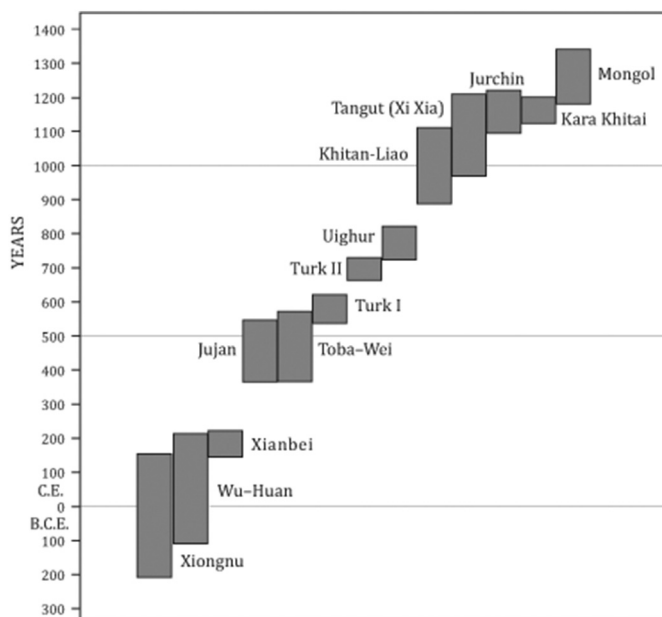


Fig. 1. Chronology of major pastoralist polities centered in eastern Inner Asia, from the Xiongnu empire through the end of the Mongol empire. The beginning and end dates for each polity are commonly accepted dates based on historical accounts, primarily from Chinese sources. A brief historical sketch of each polity is given in Rogers (2012).

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