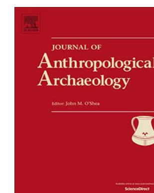
Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 48 (2017) 134–148

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

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



The dogs of war: A Bronze Age initiation ritual in the Russian steppes

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Canid sacrifice
Comparative mythology
Rituals
Zooarchaeology
Bronze Age
Eurasian steppe

ABSTRACT

At the Srubnaya-culture settlement of Krasnosamarskoe in the Russian steppes, dated 1900–1700 BCE, a ritual occurred in which the participants consumed sacrificed dogs, primarily, and a few wolves, violating normal food practices found at other sites, during the winter. At least 64 winter-killed canids, 19% MNI/37% NISP, were roasted, fileted, and apparently were eaten. More than 99% were dogs. Their heads were chopped into small standardized segments with practiced blows of an axe on multiple occasions throughout the occupation. Two adult men and two adult women from the nearby cemetery, possibly two generations of resident ritual specialists, showed unusual skeletal pathologies and post-mortem treatments. The repeated violation of the canid-eating taboo, unique to this site, combined with the metaphor of human transformation into male canids, suggests that the participants entered a liminal state typical of a rite of passage. Parallels from comparative Indo-European (IE) mythology provide the indigenous narrative that gave meaning to this ritual: we argue that it was an initiation into the widely attested IE institution of the youthful male war-band, symbolized by transformation into a dog or wolf.

1. Introduction: Youthful war-bands in mythology and archaeology

This essay describes an archaeological assemblage containing at least 64 sacrificed dogs and wolves that, we argue, is best explained as the remains of a Bronze Age coming-of-age ceremony in which boys were transformed into warriors by symbolically becoming dogs and wolves through the consumption of their flesh. The site where the canid sacrifices occurred is 3.5 km north of Krasnosamarskoe (Kras-no-sa-MAR-sko-yeh), a village in the northern Russian steppes 40 km southeast of the city of Samara (Fig. 1). The Krasnosamarskoe settlement was occupied between 1700 and 1900 BCE by people associated with the Late Bronze Age (LBA) Srubnaya (or Timber-Grave) culture, and consisted of two or at most three structures occupying an area of about 40 × 60 m located on the first terrace of the Samara River. Most of the evidence that we discuss is archaeological, but in order to move from bone counts and features to an interpretation of the canid sacrifices, we also use evidence from comparative mythology, which is presented first. The meanings of ancient rituals were multiple and depended on agent and context, but all group rituals were supported by public narratives that encoded shared beliefs about the meaning of the ritual acts (Harrison, 1991: 7–15; Puhvel, 1987: 15). Archaeologists are pessimistic about the possibility of identifying narratives and beliefs from material evidence alone, and therefore often turn to examinations of performance, social adaptation, or other aspects of ritual (Rowan, 2012; Whitehouse et al., 2014; Hull, 2014). Comparative mythology can be a particularly helpful tool in this regard because the comparison of similar myths can reveal narrative themes whose antiquity is suggested by their geographic and chronological distribution, as well as by philological analyses of shared ritual phrases (Lankford, 2007, 2011; Watkins, 1995). If we can recover ancient narrative themes we might be able to identify at least some of the beliefs that gave meaning to ancient rituals.

A report containing the primary data presented here was published previously (Anthony et al., 2016), but that volume focused on understanding how the Srubnaya pastoral economy functioned across the landscape of the lower Samara River valley in the LBA, examining the economic roles played by agriculture and mobility in an ecotone setting of steppe-and-river-valley resources. These economic questions were the principal focus of the Samara Valley Project from 1995 to 2001 (Anthony, 2016). The canid sacrifices found at Krasnosamarskoe were described in the final report in three archaeozoological chapters prepared by two archaeozoological research teams with slightly different approaches, Russian (Kosintsev, 2016), and American (Russell et al., 2016); and a third team examined the seasons of death based on incremental banding in animal teeth (Pike-Tay and Anthony, 2016). These chapters described all of the fauna, not just the canids. Their stratigraphic context was described in a fourth chapter on settlement stratigraphy and features that also covered all of the features, not just the aspects connected with the sacrificial deposits. A section on

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2017.07.004
Received 23 October 2016; Received in revised form 13 July 2017
0278-4165/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Inc.

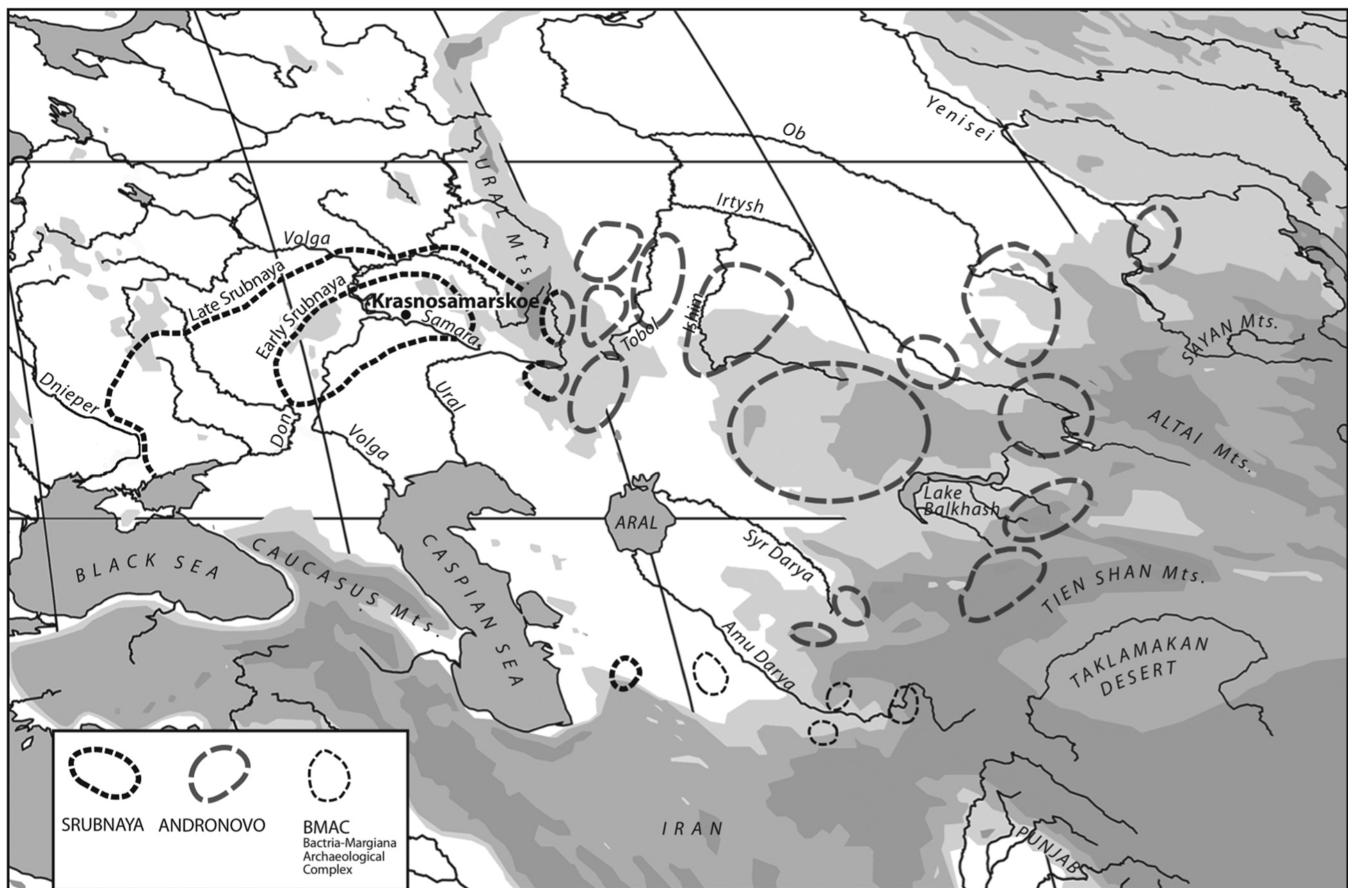

Fig. 1. Krasnosamarskoe site shown within the Srubnaya-Andronovo horizon of LBA steppe cultures, ca. 1900–1200 BCE.

comparative mythology was added to Pike-Tay's chapter on seasonality with her cooperation, but the data to which it referred was scattered through other chapters. This is the first essay that extracts the canid sacrifices at Krasnosamarskoe and reviews them comprehensively.

Although the canid sacrifice assemblage at Krasnosamarskoe appears to be unique, the association between wolves, dogs, and youthful war-bands is widespread and well-known in comparative Indo-European (IE) mythology (see West, 2007 for an overview). Youthful male war-bands, often symbolized as dogs or wolves, are thought to underlie the IE groups designated as the *luperci* or *suodales* in Latin, the *kouros* or *ephebes* in Greek, *fian* in Celtic, *männerbünde* or *jungmannschaft* in Germanic, and *vrātyas* or *Maruts* in Indic. References to youthful war-bands in these mythic traditions shared a cluster of traits recognized by Falk (1986) and McCone (1987), re-examined by Kershaw (2000) and Das and Meiser (2002), and summarized by West (2007: 448–451) and Mallory (2007: 93-94).

IE youthful war-bands were composed of adolescent (post-pubescent, pre-adult) males, sons of aristocratic or elite families in Vedic, Celtic, and Latin sources. They were sent away to live in the 'wild' outside their own society for a number of years, where they were specifically 'landless', lacking socially accepted rights to the land upon which they lived, and without possessions other than weapons. Under these conditions they could steal, raid, and take sexual license with women of other groups without the ordinary legal penalties that would have resulted from these behaviors at home (Kershaw, 2000: 114–117), a legal inversion mentioned in Germanic, Latin, Vedic, Iranian, Celtic, and Greek sources, and hinted at in Anatolian myths (Kershaw, 2000: 140–141). They returned to their homes to become adult men, after being submerged in water in Celtic and Germanic myths, or after burning their wolf-skin cloaks in the Volsunga Saga (Byock, 1990); or they migrated and founded new settlements and attracted followers. They were symbolically associated with death and symbols of death, perhaps because they were represented as dogs, and dogs were themselves symbols of death (a linkage explored at the end of this paper). They assumed dog or wolf names, garments, and symbols in Germanic, Latin, Vedic, Iranian, Celtic, and Greek sources. Becoming like a wolf or dog was a central metaphor for youthful war-bands, indicated by names containing the element 'dog' or 'wolf' (Lincoln, 1991a: 134), the wearing of dog or wolf skins (Bremmer, 1982: 136–137; Kershaw, 2000: 133, ff.), and even, in some late Vedic texts, the consumption of dogs during initiation (White, 1991:72, 87).

Youthful war-bands are thought to have actually existed among later IE-speaking groups, although whether they go back to Proto-Indo-European (PIE) is debated (Zimmer, 2004). In Europe they seem to have been absorbed into the military retinues of increasingly powerful patrons and kings during the Iron Age (Bremmer, 1982; Bremmer and Horsfall, 1987:39–42; Kershaw, 2000: 134; García Moreno, 2006). In South Asia, Heesterman (1962) and Falk (1986) found that oath-bound initiatory war-bands called Vrātyas were phased out and downgraded with the rise of the Brahmin caste, a process that had started already when the *Rig Veda* was compiled between about 1500–1200 BCE (Witzel, 1995), leading to the eventual demise of the institution.

The initiation ceremonies connected with youthful war-bands were not as widely referenced in comparative mythology as the war-bands themselves. We know, for example, that young Spartan males sacrificed a dog or dogs to an archaic god of war, Enyalios (mentioned in Mycenaean Linear B documents), as they entered the age group of *ephebes*, but no ceremonial details are preserved (Mazzorin and Minniti, 2002: 63). Perhaps the best-described ancient ritual that retained elements of a canid-related initiation ceremony was the February 15 Lupercalia ("wolf festival") in ancient Rome. Described by Cicero, born about 100 BCE, as the oldest Roman ritual, inherited from a pastoral era

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