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## Macro-regional interconnections among ancient hunter-gatherers of the Cis-Baikal, Eastern Siberia (Russia)

Ben A. Shepard<sup>a, \*</sup>, Ol'ga I. Goriunova<sup>b</sup>, Alexei G. Novikov<sup>b</sup>, Andrey A. Tiutrin<sup>b</sup>, Andrzej W. Weber<sup>c, d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, 375 Portola Plaza, 341 Haines Hall, Box 951553, Los Angeles, CA, 90095, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Archaeology and Ethnography, Irkutsk State University, Karl Marx Street 1, Irkutsk, 664003, Russia

<sup>c</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 0W6, Canada

<sup>d</sup> Laboratoire Méditerranéen de Préhistoire Europe Afrique (LAMPEA) – UMR 7269, Aix-Marseille Université, 5 rue du Château de l'Horloge – B.P. 647, 13094, Aix-en-Provence Cedex 2, France

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### ABSTRACT

We provide a multi-scalar investigation of interactions among hunter-gatherers in the Cis-Baikal region of Eastern Siberia during the transition to the Bronze Age (4900–3700 cal BP). We review and synthesize published data on burial goods and isotopic variation to reconstruct interconnections that existed both within and between hunter-gatherer groups inhabiting the Cis-Baikal's distinct micro-regions, as well as macro-regional interconnections between the Cis-Baikal and neighboring regions of Eurasia. While an extensive body of English-language literature has recently been published on the prehistory of the Cis-Baikal, this literature does not address patterning in the archaeological record at the macro-regional scale. The data we discuss here suggest that by the Bronze Age, Cis-Baikal hunter-gatherers shared several of the hallmark developments that characterized the Bronze Age of the Eurasian Steppe. We attempt to situate the Cis-Baikal within its broader geographic and historical context, and suggest that despite the absence of food production (e.g., herding) in the region at this time, local hunter-gatherers' mobility practices – involving seasonal movement and periodic aggregation – enabled these groups to participate in networks of interaction that developed throughout the larger region in the Bronze Age.

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### 1. Introduction

Narratives of mid and late Holocene sociopolitical development in the Eurasian steppe and forest-steppe vary considerably, but most emphasize the emergence of interconnections that cross-cut cultural and political boundaries, beginning in the Bronze Age (see examples in Petri, 1926; Bader et al., 1987; Chernykh, 1992; Kohl, 2006; Anthony, 2007; Koriakova and Epimakhov, 2007; Hanks, 2010; Frachetti, 2012). The subjects of this research are pastoralists: groups whose subsistence strategies focused to at least some extent on the use of domesticated animals, and who made seasonal movements in order to provision these animals (particularly in the eastern Steppe; see Frachetti, 2012). These movements by herders and their herds – because they occurred at predictable times and on a relatively frequent (seasonal) basis – are thought to

have enabled connections to form across the steppe and forest-steppe, as these groups spread apart and re-aggregated each year (e.g., Kohl, 2006).

Although the literature on Bronze Age Eurasia emphasizes the long-distance connective role that pastoralism in particular played, it is also clear that seasonal movement and aggregation, as well as and inter-group trade partnerships and marriages – all practices that could have supported the development of macro-regional interconnections – have existed among a wide range of small-to intermediate-level societies. These include groups practicing not only pastoralism, but also hunting and gathering subsistence strategies (e.g., Wiessner, 1982, 2009; Jackson, 1991; Meyer and Thistle, 1995).

Various scholars (e.g., Wolf, 1982; Jackson, 1991; Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997; Burch, 2005:237–239; Arnold et al., 2015) have observed a tendency in archaeologists' treatment of small-scale and especially hunter-gatherer societies, where these groups are often portrayed as isolated social units, and thus disconnected from global and historical context. Recent English-language research on the archaeology of mid and late Holocene hunter-gatherers of the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [benshepard@ucla.edu](mailto:benshepard@ucla.edu) (B.A. Shepard).

Cis-Baikal region of Eastern Siberia (Russia) illustrates this tendency, focusing largely on local adaptations and relatively little on the potential for connections to historic and geographic processes occurring at larger (macro-regional, inter-societal) scales. The geographic scale that archaeologists working in the Cis-Baikal employ contrasts sharply with that employed in research on the surrounding Eurasian steppe, where researchers tend to study interactions occurring over wider areas, invoking concepts such as migrations (e.g., Anthony, 2007), large-scale diffusion of Bronze Age institutions (e.g., Frachetti, 2012), and the macro-regional integration of Bronze Age economy (e.g., Kohl, 2006) both to explain patterns in archaeological data and as a framework for generating new research questions.

In addition to the difference in geographic scales of hunter-gatherer versus pastoralist archaeologies, this difference in the scales of research in the Cis-Baikal and neighboring regions also owes to the unique research objectives of the Baikal Archaeology Project (BAP; renamed the Baikal-Hokkaido Archaeology Project [BHAP] in 2011), directed by Andrzej Weber (centered at the University of Alberta, Canada). Since the early 1990s, the BHAP has collected a large corpus of bioarchaeological data in order to gain insights into individual-level variation in past human behavior throughout the Cis-Baikal (“the individual life history approach” – see Weber et al., 2002; Weber and Bettinger, 2010; Weber and Goriunova, 2013; Zvelebil and Weber, 2013). This research is ongoing, and has provided a number of important insights on the region’s complex prehistory (Weber and Bettinger, 2010; Weber et al., 2010).

Here, we employ data collected by the BHAP as well as 20th century and contemporary Russian archaeological projects in an attempt to move beyond the research questions and general interpretive framework of the individual life history approach practiced explicitly by the BHAP. More specifically, we begin by reviewing ethnographic literature that provides examples of large-scale or macro-regional connections among hunter-gatherers in order to demonstrate the geographic extent that these systems can take. We then review previous studies that shed light on hunter-gatherer mobility practices in the ancient Cis-Baikal, and evaluate evidence for the existence of long-distance interconnections (and related aggregation events) that may have tied hunter-gatherer groups in the region into broader Eurasian developments during the mid and late Holocene.

## 2. Ethnography of hunter-gatherer macro-regional connections

Inter-societal interconnections among hunter-gatherers, like those among pastoralists, result at least in part from mobility strategies that feature movements corresponding to changes in the availability of resources throughout the year. Such movements, often referred to as the “seasonal round,” not only affect hunter-gatherers’ geographic locations relative to resources, but also other aspects of community organization, such as the size of co-residential groups, which fission and re-aggregate according to these seasonal factors. Periodic, predictable population aggregations also enable group members to maintain social relationships and reproductive networks over large geographic scales, beyond the immediate family unit (e.g., Zvelebil, 2011; Kelly, 2013). In this sense, face-to-face interactions between unrelated individuals at aggregation events enable what Fitzhugh et al. (2011:91, emphasis in original) refer to as “*supra-band* information sharing,” as well as the exchange of material goods over large distances or ecological boundaries (e.g., Meyer and Thistle, 1995; Burch, 2005; Whallon, 2006).

A prime example of aggregation events among hunter-gatherers comes from the late prehistoric and early historic periods in

northwest Alaska, where groups from across the region congregated at various locales every year for a form of multi-group aggregation called “trade fairs” (Burch, 2005). Jackson (1991:266) described these events as points of “intersystem articulation [...] in essence, a periodic, large, spatially and temporally predictable gathering of unrelated hunter-gatherers, often representing ethnically and linguistically distinct groups.” At these events, attendees from far-flung territories lived together at productive and easily accessible coastal locales and river confluences during part of the summer or early fall. Trade fairs lasted for two weeks or more, with groups arriving at different times, such that the total number of participants at any one time could range from 400 to 500 to more than 2000 (Jackson, 1991; Burch, 2005). In some cases, attendees of northwest Alaskan trade fairs would travel more than 300 km to participate.

Burch (2005) describes these events as important opportunities for individuals to seek out potential mates from outside the local group. In addition, trade fair participants used these events to exchange resources as well as information. These exchanges often occurred through semi-formal, ritualized trade partnerships between non-kin or fictive kin who inhabited non-overlapping foraging areas during the rest of the year (Burch, 2005; Jackson, 1991; Johnson and Earle, 2000:176). Despite the enormity of some of these aggregation events (relative to the 6–40 person size of average co-residential units; Burch, 2005), it is noteworthy that not all individuals from participating social groups attended trade fairs. However, individuals who did not directly participate still received goods or information indirectly, through local redistribution networks (Johnson and Earle, 2000:176–177).

A staggered series of aggregation events occurred during the summer and fall throughout northwest Alaska and beyond, so that no one trade fair single-handedly integrated all of the disparate groups involved in this macro-regional network. Instead, North Pacific hunter-gatherers produced extended chains of ritualized trade partnerships and aggregation events that connected family groups both *within* and *between* ‘local’ areas, while also carrying goods and information from Northeast Asia to coastal and then inland Alaska, as well as further south, along the Northwest Coast and interior plateau of North America (Burch, 2005; Galm, 1994; Jackson, 1991:272).

Inter-group systems of interaction are also well-documented for hunter-gatherers inhabiting northern California (e.g., Kroeber and Gifford, 1949; Bean and Vane, 1978; Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997:121–148). For example, during the late prehistoric and early historic periods, yearly World Renewal ceremonies of the Tolowa, Karok, Yurok, Hupa, and Wiyot played a similar connective role. Hosts of these ceremonies endeavored to bring together large groups of people (sometimes numbering in the thousands) in order to cultivate prestige by displaying wealth (Kroeber and Gifford, 1949; Bean and Vane, 1978:663–664). Here, as in many hunter-gatherer intergroup systems, attendees of ceremonial events came from different ethnic backgrounds, polities, and geographic areas, and conversed in multiple languages. Exotic and labor-intensive goods such as large obsidian bifaces held particular importance in ritual displays at aggregation events. These objects appear to have been made from raw materials procured at distant sources, and were brought into local circulation through trade with external groups (Gould, 1966).

On the northwestern Plateau of North America, Hayden and Schulting (1997) argued for the existence of a regional “interaction sphere” during late prehistory. In their view, this system was maintained through elite competition to control and display exotic forms of wealth. Despite a background of cultural heterogeneity that included distinct local subsistence practices, social structures, and languages across the Plateau region, several object types,

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