

# PASTORAL AND NOMADIC TRIBES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C.

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As early as the Bronze Age, pastoral tribes in the northern regions of Central Asia established original cultures reflecting their own way of life and new areas of activity. This development gradually transformed the economy and culture in the direction of greater specialization. Nomads in the full sense of the term made their appearance, the renowned nomads of Asia who played such a considerable role in world history. While they differed in their economic habits and life-styles, adoption of a semi-nomadic or nomadic way of life caused them to acquire, somewhere around the late eighth or seventh century B.C., many common cultural traits, regardless of the region in which they lived, and this has created the impression that all nomads shared a similar culture. The change to new technology was the key to the development of progressive economic and cultural forms and rejection of earlier forms. It is in this transformation that the Early Iron Age is rooted, and with that is closely related the rise of chiefdoms in the territory of present Soviet Central Asia. This is well-illustrated in the contributions of the Karasuk tribe of the new historical epoch.

Many monuments in the northern regions of Central Asia are chronologically close to the Karasuk tombs and are viewed by certain authors, such as M. P. Gryaznov, as coming within the orbit of the Karasuk culture. The late phase of this south Siberian culture may also be ascribed to the initial phase of the Early Iron Age. Much time has passed since then, and a large number of Karasuk-period sites have been studied both in southern Siberia and

over a wide area of Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup> and Mongolia.<sup>2</sup> It has thus proved possible to divide the sites into two periods, the Karasuk proper and that of Kamennîy Log. The first dates from the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C. and belongs to the Bronze Age, while the second, Kamennîy Log, dates from the tenth to eighth centuries B.C. We have ascribed it to the initial phase of the Early Iron Age.

The commonest monuments of the Karasuk period are graveyards. The graves contained stone coffins, trapezoid in shape, made of thin slabs. The skeletons in them were either flexed or lay full-length on their backs: the head was normally in the broad part of the coffin, which was closed with slabs and covered with earth. Around the graves square or occasionally round enclosures were built of flagstones or rubble; they were often built up against each other, and double or triple enclosures may be found. Where, as in the Ob region, there was no stone, other materials were used. Most of the graves were occupied singly, but some contained a couple or a woman and children. The funeral inventory was quite varied: one or two bowls of food were usually placed at the head and meat at the feet. The bulk of the graves were poor in objects and many were empty, with only a sherd of pottery left among the disturbed bones of the dead; but some contained a considerable range of artefacts – beads and clay vessels or bronze tools and weapons.

Karasuk vessels are spherical with a rounded or sometimes flat base. All are hand-made; some have a fine slip and others burnished walls. They are decorated predominantly with zigzags, rhomboids or equilateral triangles and combinations thereof; one frequent pattern consists of chevrons and meanders. Some bear several tiers of geometric decoration encrusted with a white paste, often on a black, glassy ground. M. P. Gryaznov feels that they betray contacts with the steppe Bronze Age of the north Caucasus and of Soviet Central Asia, and concludes that the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age pastoral tribes had similar economies and life-styles and that inter-tribal contacts were extensive.

The commonest tool of the Karasuk period was the bronze dagger, hooked, convex, concave or straight.<sup>3</sup> Cast in stone or clay moulds, the knives had massive handles with pommels shaped in a ring – often with three knobs – a mushroom, an animal head or an entire animal figure.

The chief occupation in this culture was stockbreeding, and during the Kamennîy Log stage the proportion of sheep and goats rose considerably. Excavations have revealed that this was when the first, still primitive, bridle with bone cheek-pieces for the bit appeared. The riding horse brought the possibility of rapid movement to individual groups.

<sup>1</sup> Gryaznov, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Volkov, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Kiselev, 1951.

From his studies of Karasuk-type sites over an extensive area of Siberia and Kazakhstan, M. P. Gryaznov was able to identify ten local variants of this culture,<sup>4</sup> noting in each case certain particular features in the economy and life-style, individual styles of bronze artefacts and differences in the shape and decoration of the vessels. He also drew attention, however, to the striking resemblances between their material cultures. Knives, daggers or ornaments completely identical with those of Karasuk are spread widely in the wide area extending from the Volga to An-Yang in China.<sup>5</sup> This stemmed from the greater mobility the riding horse conferred on the population and the consequent stimulus to more extensive cultural exchange. A clear indication of the period's inter-tribal contacts is that many of the same bronze objects, which none the less have local features may be found in very different areas. These local peculiarities have been crucial both in clarifying the chronology of the Karasuk culture and in the study of its origins, which to this day give rise to some controversy.<sup>6</sup>

On careful study, the bronze knives characteristic of the Yin period in An-yang are massive tools with a broad, straight-backed blade and a slightly curved tip. At the junction of the blade and the handle there is a sharp shoulder, and they have no tenon as do those of Karasuk. Some have distinctive ornamental details completely unknown in Karasuk artefacts. There is a second group of knives in An-yang identical with those of the Yenisey, and a third group that combines the features of the other two. Crucially, the second group of knives – the Siberian type – are found in the earliest Yin period tombs in An-yang, and what is more, no precursors of them are to be found. It should likewise be noted that the first group – that typical of Yin China – become rarer as we move north-west from An-yang: even in Mongolia they are found only in the southern regions bordering on China, and beyond Lake Baikal, in Buriatia, they are unknown.

Culturally and ethnically, the roots of Karasuk lay in southern Siberia and the steppes of Kazakhstan. During the Dandybay-Begazy period of the tenth to eighth centuries B.C. the culture of the Kazakhstan steppe tribes covers a large part of that vast area. The sedentary tribes of the previous period there, developing their pastoral and agricultural economy, gradually turned to transhumant stockbreeding and the semi-nomadic way of life that went with it. They left with their herds each spring for the summer pastures after sowing the small fields around their settlements, returning in autumn to gather the harvest and to winter there. They built their winter homes in the winter grazing areas and had summer settlements in the summer pastures.

<sup>4</sup> Gryaznov, 1956

<sup>5</sup> Gryaznov, 1952.

<sup>6</sup> Kiselev, 1951, 1960.

These tangible changes in the economy and way of life of the Karasuk people led to considerable changes in their life-style, to some redistribution of family and tribal pastures and, possibly, to tribal regroupings and migrations to new parts; and this gave rise, in a relatively brief time, to the formation of a new culture, which, however, was not homogeneous. Thus the fundamental features of the Karasuk culture as a whole must have developed not in one small district, but over a very large area in which there had previously been some kind of culture that was itself highly advanced. The Andronovo culture was just such a medium for the rise of the Karasuk culture over a wide area.

The genetic links between the Karasuk tribes and those of Andronovo may be seen primarily in the shapes and decoration of the pottery. The bath-shaped Karasuk vessels have close analogies in the Andronovo pottery. The lavish geometrical decoration of Karasuk ceramics is a development of the Andronovo style. Strikingly, the mirrors, palmate pendants, rings, arabesques and tubular pendants of Karasuk are virtually exact replicas of those of Andronovo. The burial structures of the Karasuk stage proper still use Andronovo building techniques, particularly the stone coffins and the round burial enclosures. It is germane that Karasuk-type pottery is not found east of the Yenisey and that there are no burial structures of the Karasuk-type there.

The early phase has been studied through the Aksu-Ayuly II burial complex, the structures of which were typically enclosed by a double well and a perimeter gallery, and contained a massive coffin covered with stone slabs. The inner compartments still had the stepped, pyramidal beam frames that once supported the roofs. In the Aksu-Ayuly II tumulus, a layer of charred beams and ashes suggests that, as in the Tagisken mausoleums to the east of the Aral Sea, the wooden roofs were ritually fired. The stone coffin in the large tumulus contained a skeleton lying full-length and pottery of a Late Andronovo type. There were very many domestic animal bones, and even sacrificed animals had special coffins.

To the mature phase of Dandybay- Begazy belong the necropolises of Begazy, Aibas-Darasy, Akkoitas, Dandybay, Ortau II, Sangru I and III, and the settlements of Ulutau, Shortandy-Bulak, Karkaraly I–III and Yar.<sup>7</sup> Both residential and religious buildings at these sites were architecturally and structurally advanced, and a new range of spherical pottery was found there. Particularly noteworthy are the tombs of Begazy which are built of enormous granite slabs weighing up to 3 tonnes.

The Begazy mausoleums were of mixed construction with an entrance corridor, a perimeter gallery and a stone support pier set in the ground to a depth of 1.2 m. They were square structures with sides facing the points of the compass, and contained one or two chambers. In one of the Begazy mausoleums there was an internal shelf 2 m high with

<sup>7</sup> Margulan et al., 1977.

a carefully smoothed surface on which were fragments of fine-walled vessels. Above were the massive outlines of the granite slabs with which the outer walls were faced. Together with the roofing of the inner chamber they formed a gallery running completely round the building. All the walls were supported by rows of rectangular pillars. The roof was made of slabs corresponding in size to the span of the interior, which was divided by rows of stone pillars into two 3 m areas because of the need to cover a 6 m span with 3 m slabs.

A peculiarity of the Begazy mausoleums is that they contained altars to hold ritual objects and for sacrifice. One of the altars took the shape of an earthen table cut out when the foundation pit was dug. Three stone pillars were set into it, and the surface of the table around them became drenched with fat and littered with organic remains. Another sign of sacrifice and feasting was a large heap of mutton bones. On the table were large numbers of clay vessels, together with household objects, ornaments and weapons.

In its later phase, when the way of life became nomadic, the high culture of Dandybay-Begazy entered a new phase. With its original culture, the population of this period was a distinctive ethnic and cultural formation that sprang up in the steppes of Early Iron Age in Kazakhstan. These tribes developed in close contact with their kinsmen in the eastern Aral region, ancient Khorezm, southwestern Siberia, the Altai and the Yenisey whose cultures were of the Karasuk type. Despite the great distances that separate these regions, the archaeological complexes are very similar, confirming that the ancient tribes maintained close cultural and economic ties. In this cultural interchange, the primitive metallurgy of Kazakhstan – copper, tin and gold – figured prominently as an important instrument of inter-tribal commerce.

From what is known of the semi-nomadic tribal cultures of the eastern Aral and central Kazakhstan, it may be concluded that the increase in property inequalities coincided with the emergence of a tribal élite. This was especially true of the chiefs, whose prominence is very clear from the monumental sepulchres of Dandybay and Begazy and the mausoleums of Tagisken. And this in turn denotes the start of the new age, the Early Iron Age, even though the sites of this period in the steppes of Kazakhstan and ancient Khorezm contain no iron artefacts for use in day-to-day life or production.

In connection with this aspect of the history of the eastern part of Central Asia, the turning point was the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Ages, or as it is sometimes called, the 'Age of the Early Nomads' (the Scythian Age). It is precisely in that period that the territory of Mongolia, along with most of the other regions of the Eurasian steppe belt, saw the final establishment of nomadic pastoralism along with all of its technological achievements. It was then also that the nomadic-pastoral way of life developed and that the striking and highly expressive art of the nomads grew up. Improvements in means of

transport, first and foremost the extensive use of the saddle-horse, together with the mobility that their economy called for, fostered the establishment of contacts between various tribes and peoples whose homelands lay vast distances apart. The proliferation of such ties led in turn to the cultural integration of the pastoral tribes and sometimes to the formation of enormous historico-cultural communities, one of these being the Scytho-Siberian group. This was characterized by the so-called 'Scythian triad' comprising weapons, horse equipage (bridles, saddles and saddle-cloths) and art in the animal style (Fig. 1), whose closely related forms became widespread among nomadic cultures throughout the Eurasian steppes all the way from the Danube in the west to the upper reaches of the Amur in the east.

Needless to say, not everything about the Scytho-Siberian community can be explained by reference to cultural contact: it was a complex phenomenon, shaped and conditioned by many factors. An important role in the cultural integration of the Eurasian pastoralists was certainly played by the similarity of their habitats (the vast open spaces of the steppes and semi-desert ranges); the fact that they practised the same type of economic activity (nomadic cattle-raising); the nomadic existence as such; a roughly similar level of societal development marked by considerable internal differentiation based on property and social standing and by the emergence of a steppe aristocracy; a similar ideology determined in large measure by similar economic and social factors (as reflected in common religious cults and forms of artistic representation); and, last but not least, a certain ethnic unity consequent upon the fact that the tribes who migrated into and eventually mastered the steppe *oikoumene* were of Indo-Iranian stock, which is usually considered to include both the Scythians of the Black Sea and the Sakas of Central Asia.

Many areas in the eastern part of Central Asia have not yet received sufficient study by archaeologists. This is why it is still difficult to establish fully and reliably the place of the cultures of this region in relation to the many other Scythian-period cultures in Eurasia and to elucidate their role in shaping the Scytho-Siberian historico-cultural community. Nevertheless, archaeological investigations in Mongolia, Tuva, Gorno-Altai (High Altai) and Kazakhstan have shown that these regions lay not on the periphery of the Scythian world but rather the contrary, that is, that they constituted the centre of a traditional pastoral and nomadic culture which was the very well-spring of the forms that culture took throughout the entire Eurasian steppe.

In the first millennium B.C., bronze cultures in the vast steppes and semi-deserts of Mongolia and in many other parts of the Eurasian steppeland were supplanted by those of the Early Iron Age. The process of mastering the new metal was relatively slow in



FIG. 1 Eastern and central Mongolia: a-b – bone; c – bronze.

Mongolia, and it was only in the middle of the first millennium B.C. that iron began to be used on a mass scale for the production of implements and weapons.

The history of Mongolia and adjacent regions in the second and beginning of the first millennia B.C. is first and foremost the history of pastoral tribes, the story of the lives of nomadic herdsmen and their relations with the agricultural peoples to the east and west. Originating in an area bordering on one of the major centres of ancient civilization, that of Yin (Chang) China, the pastoral communities soon became a significant economic and

political force and a powerful external stimulus to the consolidation of the Yin and Zhou kingdoms of ancient China. The stockbreeding herdsmen who inhabited Mongolia and other areas north of the Great Wall in the second millennium B.C. differed from the Chinese in their economy, their way of life and their original and distinctive art. Moreover, they constituted a distinct ethnic entity, to which they owed many of the specific features of their culture.

One of the principal cultures of the Early Iron Age in Mongolia was that of the slab grave. Like many other nomadic cultures, it is represented largely by burial complexes. The graves are marked by small walls made of vertically placed stone slabs arranged in a square. Hence the term 'slab grave'. Most of the slab graves date back to Scythian times (from the seventh to the third centuries B.C.), but some of them are evidently from much earlier.

The slab-grave culture flourished over most of Mongolia. The western boundary of this culture probably ran along the Great Lake basin which divides Mongolia in a north-south direction. Only isolated smaller groups of slab graves have been discovered further west, in the Gobi Altai foothills. On the other hand, there are no slab graves at all in the Gorno-Altai and Tuva, and none has been discovered in those parts of Mongolia that border on these regions. Here, during the first millennium B.C. we find stone kurgans and *kereksurs* apparently similar to those of the Sayan-Altai region. Slab graves are rare in southern Mongolia. However, slab enclosure walls, including 'figured' ones, have been noted by Maringer and Bergman in Inner Mongolia. Sites closely resembling slab graves have been reported in areas still farther south in northern Tibet. Slab walls are also known to occur outside the borders of Mongolia, to the north in Transbaikal, while slab graves of a later date have been discovered in the Lake Baikal area as well.<sup>8</sup> The slab graves of Mongolia are identical with those of Transbaikal, suggesting that in the first millennium B.C. the steppes of central and eastern Mongolia and Transbaikal constituted a single ethno-cultural domain.

The origin of this slab-grave culture is not definitely known. The ornamentation and shape of various bronze objects and especially the technology and stylistic methods used in the making of artistic bronzes found in the slab graves have led scholars to attribute at least some of them to the Karasuk period.<sup>9</sup> At the same time it appears that the slab-grave culture shares some features with the Karasuk culture of southern Siberia.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Dikov, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; Okladnikov and Zaporazhskaya, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> Volkov, p. 44.1967.

In the first millennium B.C. and possibly much earlier, north-western Mongolia, more precisely the area lying next to the Sayan and Altai mountains, saw the emergence of another distinct ethno-cultural zone coinciding with a distribution of stone kurgans of the Pazyryk and Uyük types. The sites in question have hardly been studied. The only kurgans to have been investigated lie in neighbouring Tuva. Notwithstanding differences in the arrangement of the structures of the graves (stone kurgans with various types of fencing), the funeral rites were on the whole the same. At centre of the mound is a stone coffin or cist-like structure made of large stone slabs with a skeleton, lying on its side with knees flexed and head pointing either westwards or north-westwards, buried along with burial furniture in a very shallow pit.

The skulls found in cist kurgans are those of Europoids with a slight Mongoloid admixture. They resemble most closely the skulls from the Karasuk and Okunevo burials of southern Siberia and analogous sites in Tuva, as well as those of the Saka-Wu-sun graves of Kazakhstan and Kirghizia.<sup>11</sup> Scholars attribute the cist kurgans of Tuva to the earliest stage of the Uyük culture dating back to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.,<sup>12</sup> or take them to be a distinct Mongun-Taiga culture. Kurgan burials may belong to Karasuk times.<sup>13</sup>

The Ulangom site has multiple burials in timber-lined pits and single or double burials in stone sarcophagi, with profuse ceramic vessels, decorated with black paint and a large hoard of bronze and iron objects, including weapons as well as a wealth of ornaments of all kinds. The Ulangom burial ground can be attributed to the late stage of the Uyük culture found in Tuva and in northwestern Mongolia.

Both the cist kurgans and the Ulangom burials differ radically from the slab graves in respect of rites, grave goods (especially ceramics) and the anthropological type of their dead. Whereas the slab-grave culture belonged to typical Mongoloids of the northern branch of that race, the people of both Mongun-Taiga and Ulangom were of Europoid type, with only traces of Mongoloid features.

Early local nomad monuments had some common cultural traits (Fig. 2). They have similar Scythian prototype arrowheads; bridle gear like horse-bits and cheek-pieces; applied arts common with Black Sea Scythians and with Saka tribes of Central Asia, some recalling the Karasuk tradition; and finally deer-stones with carved representations. These deer-stones are widespread in eastern Mongolia and Transbaikal. In the west they form part of architectural complexes and in Tuva they stand besides kurgans. They are found as far as Chita, also in Kirghizia, Kazakhstan and the southern Urals. A variation of the deer-stones

<sup>11</sup> Alekseev, pp. 370–90, 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Kyzlasov, 1961.

<sup>13</sup> Grach, 1965.

is reported from the Caucasus, and on some stele from ancient Olbia on the Black Sea and along the banks of the Dniepr river.



FIG. 2 North-western Mongolia: 1, 2, 4 and 5—stone implements; 3 and 6—bronze implements.

The deer-stones fall into two major groups: stele that represent only animals and those that do not yet display all other features usually appearing on such stones, such as necklaces, narrow belts and weapons. The former subgroup is in turn subdivided into two main types; stele with ornamentally stylized animal representations and those showing naturalistically depicted animals. Stele devoid of animal representations predominate in the west but also occur with some frequency in the eastern part of their distribution. This subgroup of stones might tentatively be referred to as ‘Eurasian’. An appropriate term for stele featuring ornamentally stylized figures would then be ‘Mongolo-Transbaikalian’, since this type of deer-stone is prevalent in both Mongolia and Transbaikal.

Finally, the third variety of deer-stone (Fig. 3), the one presenting naturalistic animal figures, might well be called the ‘Sayan-Altai’ type. The animal pictures on the stele of the second and third types conform to the traditions of the Scytho-Siberian animal style. Despite certain differences in form and stylistic idiosyncrasies, an anthropomorphic image

invariably underlies the drawings seen on deer-stones of all types. Deer-stones are in fact a variety of anthropomorphic sculpture in which the human figure is rendered in a highly conventionalized and schematic form. As a rule, it is only the details that are realistically depicted, for example, pendants, bead necklaces and battle or ceremonial belts hung with weapons. It is the pictures of weapons that show detail. The weapons include daggers with mushroom-shaped annulate pommels, sometimes in the form of animal heads (goats, horses and wild-cats), bows, battle-axes, as well as those indispensable attributes of the steppeland warrior, the knife and whetstone. Particularly notable is the Karasuk aspect of most of the objects depicted.

These deer-stones with figures of animals in the Scytho-Siberian animal style appeared in Mongolia, Tuva and the Altai region as early as the ninth or eighth century B.C., whereas stele without animal pictures may be still earlier. Additional supporting evidence may be seen in a deer-stone fragment unearthed in the barrow of Arjan-kurgan in Tuva, and a stela found in a pre-Scythian complex of the Chernayagora stage in the Crimea.

As far as the east is concerned, deer-stones with zoomorphic drawings in the Scytho-Siberian animal style certainly belong to the early stages of the development of cultures of the Scythian type. It would perhaps be simpler to attribute the western deer-stones to the Scythians. But this would raise the problem of why the deer-stones of the Black Sea region should have given way in the sixth century B.C. to the genetically unrelated Scythian *babas*.

One of the best examples of early nomad monuments is the Arjan barrow, located in the mountainous area of Tuva (Fig. 4). It is the monumental tomb of an important leader, or even king, of the early nomadic tribes, in the form of a gigantic stone circle with a diameter of roughly 120 m. At the centre of the enclosure was a frame containing the main burial, which has been destroyed by looters. Around the periphery were sections constructed of massive logs, containing the bodies of several people and dozens of fully caparisoned sacrificial horses. The horses were of different colours and accordingly grouped in separate sections. The details and components of their harnesses also varied. M. P. Gryaznov, who excavated this magnificent tomb, believed that the sacrificial gifts of the various tribes subject to the buried ruler could be distinguished in this way. At Arjan, even after looting, there remained a number of artistic bronze artefacts illustrating the initial period of the so-called Scythian animal style. Judging by the entire assemblage, Arjan may be dated to the ninth or eighth century B.C. (Fig. 5).

The Arjan-kurgan is in any case considerably older than the generally recognized Scythian culture remains in the southern parts of eastern Europe; and no less ancient than the tomb of an ancient lord Ziviya (Zawiyeh) in Iran (the Sakkiz treasure) in which some investigators have perceived the sources of Scytho-Siberian art. All of this confronts the

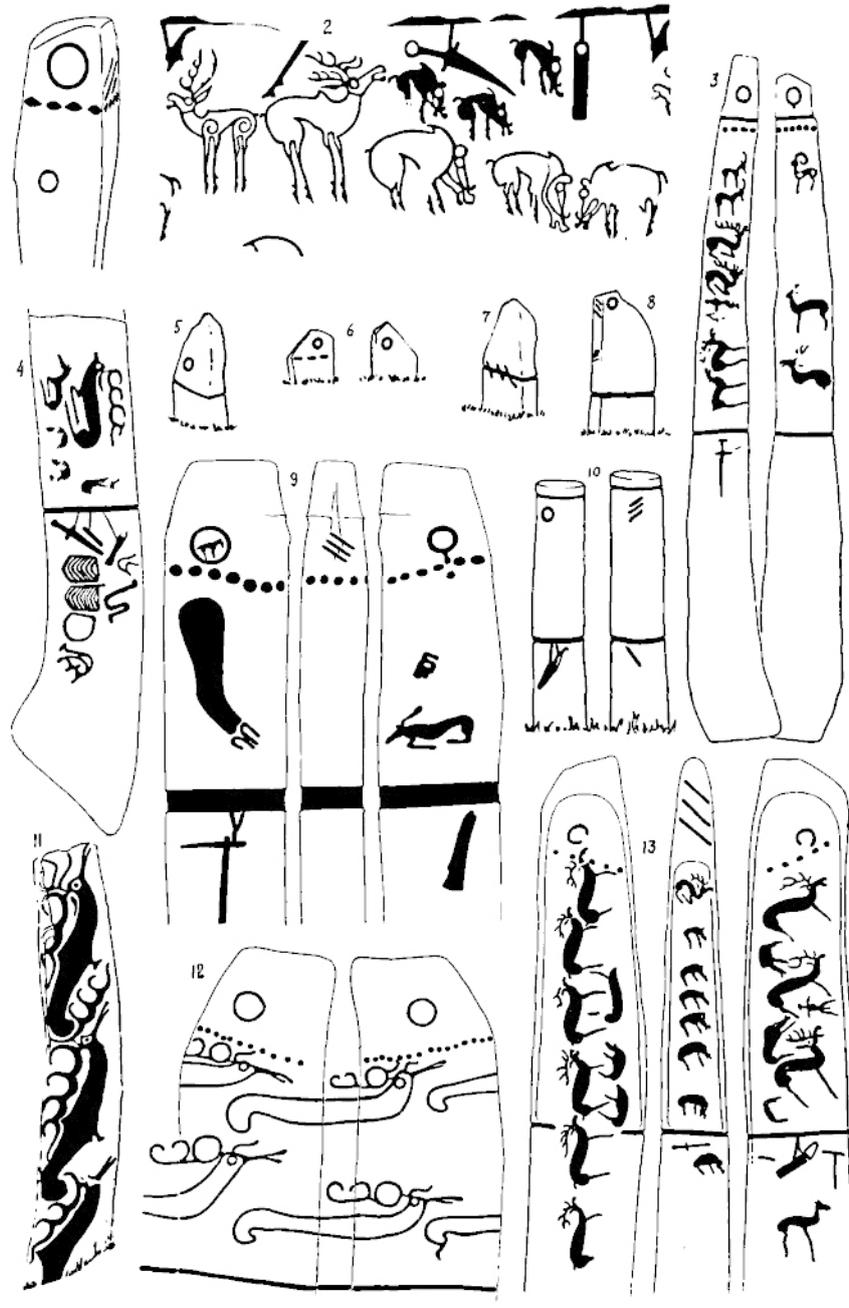


FIG. 3 Deer-stones.

scholar with the need to reassess certain concepts. The evidence of the deer-stones undoubtedly strengthens the position of those who argue for the eastern, Central Asian origin of the animal style and of the entire Scythian culture.

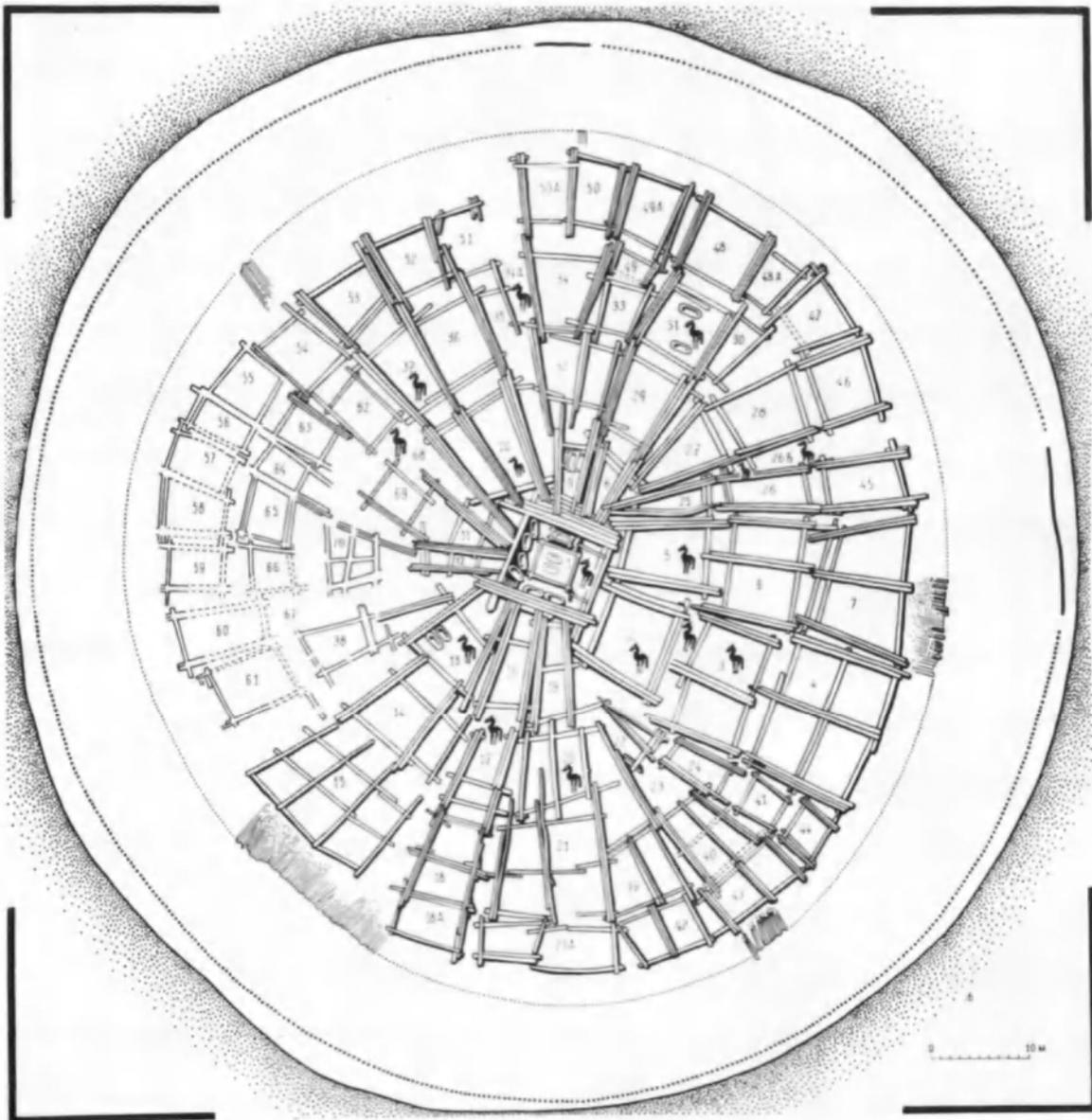


FIG. 4 Arjan: plan of a royal tomb.

## Conclusion

The Bronze Age pastoralists in the steppes completed the transition to various forms of nomadism at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. in the northern areas of Central Asia. This was a fundamental, qualitative leap comparable in its economic, cultural and political consequences with the so-called urban revolution in the settled oases of the southern regions. The wide-scale introduction of metallurgy contributed to the development of specialized branches of manufacture, including weapon-making. The accumulation of wealth



FIG. 5 Arjan: bronze artefacts called 'Scythian animal style'.

and military conflicts led to the institutionalization of power, and tribal leaders developed into absolute petty rulers. On the ideological level, these processes were reflected in the appearance of monumental tombs for these members of the developing élite. Interregional contacts increased sharply, particularly with the acquisition of horse-riding. Spiritual and material values thus spread rapidly over great distances. A striking example of this is provided by the so-called deer-stones decorated with artistic reliefs, which are known over an enormous area from Mongolia to Bulgaria. The transition to nomadism was also responsible for a fundamental change in the mode of life: the armed rider became the symbol of the new period and we encounter his equipment in burials and in the arts. On this foundation, powerful groups of early nomadic tribes were formed around the middle of the first millennium B.C. A new force as powerful as the ancient States of the Orient entered the arena of world history.