

Early Migrations in Central Asia

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From now on, the members of the archeologic establishment of the former Soviet Union shall have to work in Central Asia under reduced material and impaired administrative conditions. So they may hardly keep up the dominant position in the field which they have attained by the sole privilege to excavate in a tremendous territory for many decades.

The successors are already entering the stage. The scholars of the Peoples Republic of China have now a precinct of similar dimensions and aspects at their disposal. So they may henceforth amaze colleagues and the lay public by their fascinating discoveries. Certainly the monopoly is not so exclusive, as it was for a while in the former Soviet Union. Our Chinese colleagues need technical equipment and funds from the Western world. In the new era of austerity, that seems inevitable, not only governmental agencies but private donors as well may support the ongoing fieldwork. So publicity is an essential precondition for further collaboration.

More effectively than anyone else, Victor Mair directed the attention of the general public and the scholars to the "prehistoric desiccated corpses from the desert sands around the edges of the Tarim Basin" (Mair 1993, 1994a, 1994b:1). The main challenge for him was the fact that many of the deadbodies have features of a definite "European" character, they are "Caucasians" according to the terminology, used in the USA. That became generally known by a popular article in the journal *Discover*, inspired by Mair. It was written by Evan Hadingham (1994) and illustrated with photos by Jeffery Newbury. The corpses do not form an utterly homogenous group but belong to different types (Mair 1994:6). In this area, Mongoloid partners show up only later, and then in gradually growing proportions up through the Han-period.

According to the overview of the Chinese archeologist Han Kangxin on which Mair has based his report, in the earliest graves skulls were found, which are clearly Europoid of a dolichocephalic strain. They closely resemble "the Proto-European pattern with some Nordic features".

According to Han Kangxin, quoted by Mair, these earliest settlers might have entered the area of Lop Nor, along the Könch Darya from the northwest before 1800 BCE. Han suspects that they came from the territory of the Afanasievo culture in Southern Siberia. Whether or

not this is correct remains an open question, and even Mair (1994:12) is somewhat sceptical.

Mair had already previously suggested the possible identification of the “Caucasian corpses” in the Tarim Basin with the ancestors of the Tocharians. He now reduces this attribution to “at least some of the corpses” and he has especially those of the Kōnch Darya in mind, who were present there “at the twentieth century before our era”. That is in agreement with the observations made by the scholars studying the written documents preserved in this area, but 2,000 years later. Then the Lop Nor Region formed an independent or semi-independent state under Indian rulers, in the 3th and 4th centuries A.D. called Kroraina. The documents, written in a local Indian language, have many Iranian loanwords borrowed at different times. Underlying this language was a Tocharian substratum, attested by 100 words, and almost a thousand proper names (Brough 1965, 1970, Burrow 1936). Only the preservation of two Tocharian languages in Kucha, Karashahr, and Turfan allows the clear identification (Vorob’eva - Desjatovskaya 1992:77-84).

Due to its eccentric position in the frame of the other Indo-European languages, as a centum language in two variants (A or B)—even farther east than the (expected) satem-idioms—Tocharian has been intensely studied. When the isoglosses and the grammatical similarities are properly arranged, we are able (following the proposal of Ivanov), to assume the following sequence: The homelands of the Proto-Tocharians were situated in a distant past (fourth millenium BCE) in the southeastern border zone of the Indo-European community (perhaps then as a “Sprachbund”). That was near to the areas where the “Anatolian” Indo-Europeans lived, in contact with North Caucasian tribes. Their neighbors during the following phase were Indo-Iranians, Proto-Greeks and Proto-Armenians, but even at this time they appear to have been in contact with Celtic and Italian dialects. On the other hand, the Proto-Tocharians subscribed to special prosodic rules used for ritual songs and dances. Such metrical correspondences were perhaps survivals of the time when the Proto-Indo-European tribes formed a religious community (Merpert 1988:22-26).

Afterwards, their neighbors were tribes who lived in Central and Eastern Europe, not only Proto-Teutons, but Proto-Balts or Proto-Slavs as well. From this position, the Proto-Tocharians (already in contact with East-Iranians) moved to the steppes of Middle Asia, where they associated with Finno-Ugrians and received through this mediation even East-Iranian peculiarities (Ivanov 1992:10-13). Perhaps a Dravidian substratum was also involved in this process.

Not much later, the areas in the east and northeast were affected, Tocharo-Turkish relations are evident, and some loanwords connected with spiritual concepts indicate contacts with the emerging

Chinese civilization (Ivanov 1992:15). According to Ivanov, that made it easier for some groups of the Tocharian-speaking populations to proceed even farther to the east, far beyond the area where they are later on attested by written sources. Perhaps through such advances the Austroasiatic name of the elephant was integrated in both Tocharian languages (Ivanov 1992:16). Together with Iranians and Tibetans, the Tocharians formed the core of a powerful nomadic confederation. When the Yuezhi were defeated by the Xiongnu, they moved to the west, dislocating other tribes, finally forming the empire of the Kushans.

It is evident that Tocharians adapted themselves to the chances offered by different niches of the environment. But the route of immigration, as designed by modern linguists using varying isoglosses and other arguments for ethnic contacts, is as though by mutual agreement founded on the assumption that the Tocharians moved as a solid block, or at least as a wave of almost contemporary steps which might be identified as one coherent culture—in case the excavations could be directed to the right places. So Mair, in accordance with Han's researches, referring to the results of Soviet archeology, proposes this sequence: 1) Yamna, 2) Afanasievo, 3) Sintashta-Petrovka, 4) Andronovo. From here the way of the immigrants may have diverged; one line branching off in a southern direction appears to have reached the Kōnch Darya (Mair 1994:6). The main movement would proceed along the northern fringes of the steppes; here the Tocharians met Turks and other Altaic peoples, then finally Chinese.

In this context the affinities to several linguistic complexes in Middle and Eastern Europe—typical for the Tocharians—would remain enigmatic. Are they only the heritage of a distant past? This—in fact very conventional—attempt to bring archeology in line with the linguistic postulates cannot be maintained when the recent discoveries and investigations are taken fully into consideration.

The Afanasievo culture is now attested by more and earlier radiocarbon dates than before. Most of them belong to the 3rd millennium. Apparently cattlebreeding was the main production and caves like Denisova were used as sheepfolds (Derevianko-Molodin 1994: 253-256).

During the following period (22nd-17th centuries BCE), a different population entered from the northern forests, but the symbolic system is related to that which was diffused by migratory tribes in the eastern part of the Great Steppes. It is evident that the direction of the cultural diffusion was directed westwards. Perhaps innovations, like inhumation in stone cists put together from slabs which had previously been decorated by polychrome paintings representing animals and masked dancers were introduced by priestly communities that had transasiatic connections. In Southern Siberia, this phase is represented by the Okunev culture.

During the 16th and 15th centuries BCE, a similar network was spread among cemeteries and sanctuaries west of the Urals, in Western Siberia, and in the Altai-Sajan region (Černych 1976, Černych-Kuzminych 1989). In this network, it is possible to observe social stratification: the chiefs were metallurgists and horse-breeders, most probably also priests, while the workmen and followers lived as hunters and fishermen. A superior technique allowed the production of thin-shelled bronzes which may have been stimulated by contacts with Southeast Asia. The datings however are supported by relations to Early Greece. The decorative system observed in the hoard of Borodino and in the shaft-graves of Mycenae was created under such conditions. On the other side, large knives which belonged to the equipment of the charioteers in the royal burials of the Shang dynasty may be explained in the same context.

One more part in this many-voiced concert was discovered only recently—the Bactrian-Margiana Archeological Complex (investigated by Sarianidi 1993). The background was elucidated by the solid and fascinating studies of Pierre Amiet (1986, 1989). By influences radiating from Elam, a “zone of exchanges” was built up, connecting centers of handicrafts and artistic production which had existed since the 4th millennium. They were supported by the work of peaceful farmers. Early in the second millennium, however, the “zone of exchanges” was transformed into a powerful confederation with a division of labor between tribal units under the management of a religious community. Consolidation as an urban society was inhibited for a while and the traditions of the past were maintained in “Ceremonial centers” with mock fortifications (Sarianidi 1990:102-166).

When the Iranians conquered these areas, they took over the organization among sedentary and nomadic tribes that persisted even when they founded states on the Iranian plateau (as Medes and Persians). As one of the tribes, the priests were integrated, albeit with problems mentioned in the written sources. The Maguš remained dangerous outsiders.

So far the speculations on the identification of the Tarim Basin mummies, starting from the linguistic material, have used a conventional ethnogenetic model: the Proto-Tocharians were imagined as a wave of western immigrants, their languages ramifying when they spread over enormous distances. Only one branch, with two related idioms, is attested by written documents.

The alternative would be to postulate a series of bold advances, perhaps by specialists for the breeding of various gregarious animals, some of them using wagons as moving houses. The integration took place in Central Asia and scarcely could have had a homogenous result. Only the settlers along the northern branch of the Silk Road are attested by the written documents.

Evidently Mair was fully aware of this possibility. He correctly observed that the "extraordinary situation" is not properly explained, but he is not ready to divulge his own suppositions, as long as the linguists have not reacted to the new archeological evidence. However, the linguists would need many years to become accustomed to the new situation. So in this case a kind of shock therapy might be salutary. In any case, he claims that "it is best not to rule out the possibility of lengthy nomadic migrations" (Mair 1994:12). The assertion that the Tocharian complex was formed in Central Asia by the merging of tribes who had arrived at different times from different European territories seems to be a very bold challenge, but it is only one step more beyond that what is contained in Mair's request, namely not to refute migrational interpretations.

The question of what ecological conditions favored the participation of many foreign groups in the process of settlement in Central Asia so far has no clear answer. At least for a while, the area was relatively inviting for immigrants from the Far West—from Europe. (Cf. the article by K. Hsü elsewhere in this volume.)

Now we have to reckon with the fact, established in the meantime, that on the eastern borders of the steppes, there were neighbors who turned very early to a producing economy allowing a high density of the populations involved. It was not only the cradle of the Chinese civilization which was radiating to all areas which were fit for agriculture. A similar focus existed in Dongbei (Manchuria) where radiocarbon dates (Nelson 1995:8-9) indicate a progressive development between the 5th and the 2nd millennium BCE. The early metallurgy in this area was not taken over from the southern neighbors; it was independent, although its origins remain enigmatic.

Perhaps the eastern impact was too much oriented to agrarian expansion, so that climatic changes and human activities were destructive for the necessary delicate climatic equilibrium. Brentjes has presented his actual deliberations on this matter. He reminds us that the plague had a center of diffusion in the mountains of Mongolia, with the result that digging in the soil may have led to an epidemic catastrophe.

In any case, the few places where we can assume a continuity of development since the Paleolithic period are very far away—in the territory of the so-called Hissar culture in Tajikistan (Ranov 1973, 1975, 1986).

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