

**Inner Asian Pastoralism in the Iron Age: The Talgar Case in Southeastern
Kazakhstan**

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Abstract

The romantic image of the fierce Iron Age horse-riding pastoralists of the first millennium BC who roamed the Eurasian steppe has dominated our historical imagination of nomadic confederacies. The Scythians, Saka, Sarmatians, Wusun, and Yuezhi, when described by ancient Greek historians and Chinese chroniclers, have been identified as the ‘barbarians’ (Beckwith 2009). In such accounts these nomadic barbarians occupied the ‘edges’ or peripheries of the core agrarian states. In this essay I explore how the Iron Age archaeology of settlements and burial kurgans of a remote area along the Tian Shan Mountains of southeastern Kazakhstan provides a different picture of the so-called barbarians. In order to build an archaeological case that allows for a different interpretation of the formation and evolution of Iron Age agro-pastoralism at the southern edge of the Eurasian steppe, this story must be told through the lens of a field archaeologist.

Key words: Iron Age archaeology, Nomadic States and Confederacies, agro-pastoralism, Eurasia, appanage

Introduction

The Iron Age (ca. 800 BC to AD 400) archaeology of the Semirech’ye (Seven-rivers) region along the northern edge of the Tian Shan Mountains of

southeastern Kazakhstan serves as a case study for examining the social evolution of early nomadic confederacies and states of the Saka and the Wusun. The Talgar region is located below the foothills of the Tian Shan Mountains in Southeast Kazakhstan (Figure 1). The Talgar region has been the focus of field surveys and excavations since the mid-1990s by an international team of Kazakh and American researchers (Chang et al. 2003).

The ‘nomadic orientation’ of these Iron Age confederacies refers to the highly flexible, de-centralized form of socio-political organization held by the nomadic aristocracy who controlled the farming and pastoral territories of the Talgar region and its surroundings. These aristocratic elites were political and military leaders who controlled a commoner population consisting of farmers, herders, and craftsmen. Furthermore the aristocratic elite managed the long-distance flow of commodities between China, Central Asia, and the Eurasian steppe during the first millennium BC. The military clout of the nomadic confederacy’s leaders and their ability to forge alliances with the agrarian states of China and Central Asia protected these long-distance trade routes. Thus the archaeology of the Talgar region is a lens through which to test this interpretive framework drawn from the ethnographic and historical contexts of the Hsiung-nu and Mongol empires and the historic Kazakh state.

The theoretical framework is based upon a nomadic model for state formation whereby de-centralized, hierarchical control of large territories of land held by a class of elites who in turn protected a stratum of commoners. I consider the empirical archaeological facts that characterize Iron Age landscapes of

Semirech'ye--- that is the distribution of settlements and artifact scatters interspersed by burial mounds and/or ancient graves. Lets begin with a simple question: What was the relationship between the simple hamlets and village settlements and the nearby burial kurgans (mounds) where elites were buried? Embedded in this question is the notion that the settlements were also the places where farming, herding, and crafting activities took place. The lines of burial kurgans along old streambeds found in close proximity to the simple village and settlement sites, all dating to the same time period (ca. 450 BC to AD 100) (Chang 2013). The construction of the burial mounds, often consisting of layers of stone and earth, required high labor inputs. The nearby Issyk Golden Warrior tomb found in 1969 in a side chamber with over 3000 artifacts, includes a magnificent headdress of animal-style plaques of horses with ibex horns, plaques of twisted snow leopards, a suit fashioned of sewn golden plaques, an iron dagger and a sword, a collection of wooden serving trays and ceramic jars and bowls (Akishev 1978). The burial mounds of the Talgar region range from large, impressive mounds of over 9 m in height and 80 m in diameter to small, modest mounds of 0.5 height and less than 4 m in diameter, many robbed in antiquity. Did both the elite and commoners live in the nearby settlements? And how was Iron Age society organized on the Talgar fan?

Study Area

The Talgar region is a geographical area just 25 km east of Almaty, the largest city in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Talgar alluvial fan is formed by the

Talgar River that originates at the slopes of Peak Talgar (almost 5000 m asl), the highest mountain of the Zailiisky Alatau, part of the northern Tian Shan Range. The river empties into the larger Ili River Basin. The medieval settlement of Talgar, a 9th to 13th century AD enclosed town, is situated at the apex of the fan on the east bank of the river. The alluvial fan slopes gently down slope to the lower reaches of the semi-arid steppe forming wide, sinuous meanders. Southeastern Kazakhstan has a temperate continental climate, with dry, hot summers and moist, cold winters and early springs. During the peak periods of the Talgar occupation, notably 500 BC to AD 100 and again at ca. AD 1000, geological and soils maps and profiles record the stability of the river channel and soil formation horizons along with a fall in water levels at Lake Balkhash, signaling the shift to drier and warmer conditions of the temperate continental climate (Macklin et al. 2014).

Since 1994 the Kazakh American Archaeological Expedition (KAAE) has conducted surveys and excavations, identifying Iron Age settlements and burial mounds. In the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s, transect surveys were conducted in plowed fields within the core area consisting of 180 sq km. Since 2011 additional survey areas to the north have been added to the original survey area, encompassing the entire Talgar fan, about 550 sq km. Over 1200 sites (burial mounds and artifact scatters) have been recorded, the majority are burial mounds or graves. The field excavations have been conducted on three Iron Age sites, Tseganka 8, Taldy Bulak 2, and Tuzusai (Figure 2). Tuzusai, the focus of excavations from 1994-1996, and again from 2008 to the present (2013), is the

largest village settlement in the area, about 8 to 10 hectares in size. All three sites fall within the time span of 450 BC to AD 100.

Iron Age settlements and agro-pastoralism

Often the formation of early horse-riding nomadic confederacies of Eurasia is described as taking place during the shift at about 1100 to 900 BC from a warm and moist climate to a dry and cold climate, thus resulting in the spread of grasslands and unfavorable conditions for cereal cultivation (Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007:11). Nomadic pastoralism or the herding of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses was a viable economic adaptation for the vast steppe lands. New evidence shows that climate change during the Holocene in Semirech'ye (the 7-rivers area along the northern edge of the Tian Shan Mountains including the Ili Basin) shifted between cold and wet climatic conditions and warm and dry climatic conditions. Thus, the previously proposed climatic shift to dry and cold conditions was not an important factor leading to the origins of Iron Age horse-back riding pastoralism in the early part of the first millennium BC in Semirech'ye. The actual climatic shift in Semirech'ye was the shift from colder and wetter climate in the time period from 1000 BC to 500 BC, sometime during the onset of the Saka period (ca. 700 BC) to a climate that became warmer and drier during the mid-Saka and late Saka period (500 BC to 200 BC) and through the beginning of the Wusun period (200 BC to AD 100) (Macklin et al. 2014). In the Semirech'ye region, and particularly on the Talgar fan, both farming and herding were viable strategies during the second-half of the first millennium BC, a period of warmer and drier

conditions. Thus, for this region of southeastern Kazakhstan, multi-resource pastoralism was probably the rule, not the exception. Indeed for the past fifty years, local archaeologists working on the Saka and Wusun periods of the Iron Age in our region have discussed the presence of both farming and herding (Akishev and Kushaev 1963; Baipakov 2008).

Paleo-ethnobotanists examining the phytolith (opal silicates of ancient plant cells) and charred remains of seeds identified wheat, barley, broomcorn and foxtail millets at the three Iron Age sites (Rosen et al. 2000; Chang et al. 2003; Spengler et al. 2013). The domesticated animal remains at these three sites consist of sheep and goats (between 50 to 70 percent of the total assemblages), cattle (between 14 to 19 percent), and horses (6 to 10 percent) (Chang et al. 2003). Small quantities of camel and dog also have been found. The remains of wild animals include red and roe deer, hare, fox, wild swine, and birds. Most likely the domesticated animals of sheep and goats, cattle, and horses were consumed as meat; secondary products such as milk, wool, hair, hides, and dung were important, as well as the use of cattle for traction and horses for transportation.

Agricultural cultivation of multiple crops such as wheat, barley, and the two millets required considerable labor inputs during the summer months, especially since free-threshing wheat requires a 3 month growing season and does not tolerate drought well (Spengler et al. 2013). The millets, on the other hand, are drought resistant and have a shorter growing season. Most likely the Iron Age people of the Talgar fan incorporated both farming and herding subsistence activities at the lowland settlements of Tuzusai, Tseganka 8, and Taldy Bulak 2 in the following

ways: (1) planting, tending, watering, and harvesting of wheat, barley, and the millets took place from late spring through early fall; (2) the herding of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses took place in summer months in upland grazing areas away from the agricultural crops; and (3) in fall months after the harvest, herders returned from upland pastures with sheep, goats, cattle and horses, seeking grazing land and forage in the vicinity of the permanent hamlets or villages. This short-distance mobility between the alluvial fan and the foothills and upland valleys of the Tian Shan resulted in no more than 10 to 30 km in distance and a range in elevation from 550 m to 1100 m asl on the alluvial fan to 1300 to 2600 m asl in the foothills and uplands.

For the Iron Age occupants of Talgar, agro-pastoralism provided more than a diversified economy, it also minimized overall risks due to climatic, environmental, or socio-political conditions. When crop harvests were poor due to drought, households could chose to increase livestock numbers relying upon frequent moves across different grazing lands. In periods when access to forage or grazing lands was scarce, more household labor could be invested in crop cultivation. The long-term storage of grains buffered both herders and farmers from low productivity of either crops or herds. Household labor could be divided so that some family members traveled to upland pastures with herds of domesticated animals and others stayed in the lowlands to tend the crops and maintain village houses. The upland refuges were also places where social networks could be forged with other pastoral transhumant households.

Yet the scheduling of farming activities required careful management on the part of households and communities. The millets involved the shortest growing seasons (60 days or more). The wheats, either planted in the fall and harvested in the early summer (winter wheat) as it is today, or planted in the early spring and harvested in the fall, required a longer growing season (a minimum of 100 frost-free days) and a steady source of water. Barley was planted in the spring or early summer and harvested in the late summer (80 to 100 days). Wheat and barley could be harvested about the same time, while the two millets were harvested earlier (Spengler et al. 2013). These harvests, however, took place during the time period when herders were in the upland summer pastures. Diversification of crops and upland transhumant herding placed high demands on the available household labor. Wheat usually requires a steady source of water during its first two months of growth. Today, rainfall is plentiful in the early spring but drops off in the hottest months of the summer from mid-June to the end of July. Therefore, it is possible that simple systems of ditching or stream diversion were used to channel water to farm plots. If indeed simple water channeling was practiced, then more labor would have been required. The presence of both multi-cropping of cereal grains and a mixed herd composition required careful scheduling and the intensification of labor efforts for the average Iron Age household of Talgar. This intensification of farming and herding production during the Iron Age occupation also resulted in an increase in population size and greater degrees of social hierarchy.

At the cusp of the Saka and Wusun transition (450 BC to AD 100) several factors may have contributed to agricultural intensification, population increases,

and more obvious inequality between the commoners and the aristocratic nobility. These factors could include: (1) the shift to dry and warm climatic conditions, requiring farmers to use either stream diversion or more complex irrigation systems: (2) the growth in the long-distance exchange networks linking the Central Asian and Chinese core-states, resulting in the official opening of the Silk Route in the 1st century BC; and (3) the increase in political allegiances with other nomadic empires or confederacies or the core-agrarian states. The Iron Age landscape of the Talgar fan shows settlements interspersed with burial mounds. These settlements were year-round hamlets and villages that produced cereal grains and domesticated livestock for household and local consumption, but at times also as surplus that could enter into the larger exchange network. The series of alluvial fans, similar to Talgar, were also part of a larger herding and farming production zone that contributed to a more extensive flow of commodities along an east-west network. The members of the Saka confederacy (ca. 800 to 200 BC) and Wusun state-let (200 BC to AD 400) who occupied these fans, not only benefitted from the richness and diversity of the farming and herding systems, but also may have incorporated both 'pure' nomadic pastoral groups and agrarian communities in nearby regions. For the larger confederacy or state, dense pockets of commoner populations were also readily available as military or labor conscripts. The wealth of the Talgar fan could be seen in terms of population numbers and rich surplus resources. As long as the local Talgar populace could support itself sufficiently and therefore reproduce its own social hierarchy, the Saka confederacy leaders or Wusun supreme rulers need only skim off military personnel or surplus resources from these rich,

fertile fans. At a lower stratum of aristocracy, the local elites who controlled the Talgar fan, increased their own status in terms of wealth and political clout through their successful management and control of the commoners and their ability to transform surplus products into commodities that could be exchanged along a proto-Silk route. Of the many surpluses the local Talgar folk produced, perhaps the most valuable were riding horses, although noted as relatively low percentages in the faunal remains found at Talgar. The Han Chinese accounts specifically mention the Chinese desire for obtaining horses from the Ferghana Valley (Hulsewe 1979). The Ili River Basin is geographically situated between the Ferghana Valley to the west and China to the east; therefore it is quite possible that any horses obtained from petty producers along the route, including from Talgar, were also funneled to the Chinese.

In keeping with the spirit of this special edition of Nomadic Peoples, I will draw upon a series of ethnographic and historic perspectives on Eurasian nomadic states. The archaeological perspectives on the Iron Age of southeastern Kazakhstan also contribute to a deeper historical understanding of the social evolution of the early nomadic confederacies and states of Eurasia. A single narrative that draws upon contextual information and conceptual frameworks drawn from site surveys and excavations in the Talgar region also has the potential to create a nuanced account of Iron Age agro-pastoralism and nomadic social structure that could be tested empirically through future surveys and excavations of Iron Age sites in Semirech'ye.

Iron Age Settlement Patterns

The distribution of Iron Age hamlets and villages interspersed with burial mounds and graves across a single alluvial fan provides the archaeologist with a palimpsest of human occupation across a physical landscape. The ancient herders, farmers, craftsmen and aristocratic elite inhabited the Talgar fan, changing the physical landscape by building and occupying hamlets and villages, through their practices of farming, herding, fishing, and foraging, and by their commemoration of the dead by constructing burial mounds and graves. Although the Iron Age villages and hamlets were most likely year-round fixed settlements, seasonal pastoral transhumance was also practiced. There are over 70 Iron Age settlements across the Talgar alluvial fan defined from the surface surveys conducted by the KAAE. The settlements are often visible as thin artifact scatters of ceramic sherds, grinding stones, animal bones, and rock scatters found in recently plowed fields. Less than ten of these artifact scatters have been tested for sub-surface features such as pits and domestic architecture; in all cases where artifact scatters have been tested for sub-surface features we have found evidence for ancient Iron Age settlements. Many of these Iron Age settlements are situated along the banks of ancient streambeds. In close proximity to the settlements are burial mounds or small, mounded graves, also dating to the same time period. The burial mound locations often are found in linear clusters of 3 to 9 mounds. Often larger mounds are interspersed with smaller ones. These mounds also are located along the banks of old streambeds. The overall spatial dispersal of settlements and burial mounds

suggest a clan or kin-based system of territorial marking delineated by the linear clusters of the burial mounds.

I propose a three-tiered ordering of settlements: (1) first-order settlements (Tuzusai) ranging from 5 to 10 hectares with complex architecture including agglomerated semi-subterranean pit houses, mud brick platforms, hearths, fire pits, and oven, walled compounds, storage pits, post-moulds, and long ditches probably used as boundaries circumscribing residential areas; (2) second-order settlements (Taldy Bulak 2) about 1 hectare in size with discrete semi-subterranean pit house architecture, and includes ditches or palisades, clusters of store rooms, storage pits, metal-finishing complex, fire pits, and mud brick walls; and (3) third-order settlements (Tseganka 8) about 0.5 hectares in size, includes both discrete and agglomerated round and sub-rectangular pit houses, cists, storage pits, and fire pits. This schema suggests that small, discrete hamlets (third-order settlements) might have served as satellites to larger second-order or first-order villages. A central first-order place such as Tuzusai was as a large village with houses and residential areas dispersed and scattered throughout a large area. At Tuzusai 2011 and 2012 excavations a raised mud brick platform with five or six smashed vessels, including cooking and storage pots, and half a bronze bracelet, was uncovered and indicates the presence of an elite household.

At all three sites there appear to be clusters of settlements suggesting that these places represent settlement nodes between which are empty spaces, areas used for farming or pasture. All three sites must have been situated on active streams in order to support the water requirements of people, plants, and animals. There is

actual evidence that Tuzusai settlement was occupied during a period of active stream flow; an Iron Age ceramic sherd was found in a test pit excavated about 1 m deep in the bottom of the old stream bed, about 5 to 6 m deep from the site surface. This Iron Age sherd was deposited when the stream was active, most likely during the period of Tuzusai occupation. The burial mounds associated with the settlements served as territorial markers for establishing ancestral claim to the streams and fertile land. Thus if one considers the spatial arrangement of the fan of sites and burial mounds an overall pattern of site locations emerges: (1) near active water sources; (2) near land that could be farmed and used as grazing lands; and (3) in close proximity to other first- second- or third-order places. This type of spatial arrangement across the landscape indicates the presence of social hierarchy that may have been kin or clan-based, indicating that even the commoners had a system of social hierarchy. Also the settlements were most likely year-round habitations where only a sector of the population, those practicing transhumant pastoralism, left the main lowland settlements during the summer months for upland pastures. Most accounts of the Iron Age Saka or Wusun confederacies or state-lets emphasize pastoral or nomadic mobility as the key factor in core-periphery relations. The Chinese Dynasties were plagued by the threat of nomadic incursions, presumably from the Saka, Wusun, Hsiung-nu, and others (Beckwith 2009). Yet the Talgar archaeological data demonstrate the importance of a sedentary, year-round agro-pastoral settlement system, not a mobile economy of pastoralists. If, indeed, a good proportion of the Talgar Iron Age population was sedentary, why then were

the 'nomadic traditions' such as burial mound construction and the rich burial inventories of 'animal-style' ornaments so prominently displayed?

Social Organization and Craft Specialization

The social organization of the Iron Age society is difficult to ascertain. There are several factors noted at recent excavations at the Iron Age settlement of Tuzusai that are good indicators of the increasing social hierarchy and craft specialization on the Talgar fan. Architectural and site-layout of the mid-Iron Age settlements reflect the social grouping and possible ranking of households. Agglomerated room blocks or pit house configurations are common at Tuzusai. In the 2008 and 2009 excavations a rectangular meeting room with multiple plastered floors surrounded by three or four pit house structures was uncovered. In 2011 and 2012 a raised mud brick platform was discovered with two attached semi-subterranean rooms, each with fire pits. In 2013 a house defined by double-walled construction on the west side, and a lower split-level room on the east side was uncovered. These agglomerated clusters of mud-brick rooms or pit houses sometimes buttressed or reinforced with mud brick architecture indicate simple household organization of nuclear or extended families occupying single rooms or pit houses attached to communally shared raised platforms or rectangular meeting places. This honey-comb pattern of household organization appears to be typical of the Tuzusai settlement, but not at Tseganka 8 or Taldy Bulak 2. The raised mud brick platform may have been built for an elite household.

At Tseganka 8 the seven pit houses appeared to be organized in two rows, each round or sub-rectangular house a discrete unit, although two sub-rectangular houses shared common walls. At Taldy Bulak 2, there was an alignment of three large storage rooms (ranging in size from 1.9 m X 2.3 m) and one small storage pit (1.0 m X 2.0 m), and 2 discrete pit houses, and several living floors. At the second-order and third-order settlements, the domestic household architecture does not appear to follow an agglomerated pattern, but more typically are defined as spatially discrete units spread across the site area. This could indicate a more simplified form of social organization, based upon separate family dwelling with some shared storage facilities at Taldy Bulak 2. At Tseganka 8 there also appeared to be discrete separate family dwellings situated in one or possibly two rows, along the eastern edge of the stream embankment. The spatial differences in household patterning also seems to conform to size hierarchy and possibly differences in the social hierarchy of site types. I hypothesize that the first-order settlements included larger kin-based units and high status or wealthy households as well as low status households; second-order and third-order settlements included household units of equal social ranks.

The occupants of the Talgar settlement sites engaged in local ceramic production and some metal-finishing activities. To date, no direct evidence of either pottery kilns or metallurgical areas have been discovered. At all three sites small amounts of metal or ceramic slag have been found. Five different wares, including orange, red, gray and transitional wares are noted at Tuzusai (Heinsch 2013). Metal-finishing was probably conducted at Taldy Bulak 2. Pottery-making

probably relied upon local clays. The ceramic vessels were fired to temperatures of 800 C to 1200 C. The large diversity of ceramic vessel forms and especially handle forms at Tuzusai indicate that the local crafters had a large repertoire to draw upon, probably emulating pot forms from Central Asia and Western China. In a few cases the handles appeared to be riveted to the pot sides in the same way metallurgists attached metal handles to iron or bronze cauldrons. This could suggest that the ceramic and metallurgical craftsmen shared techniques. At these settlement sites crafting knowledge did not appear to extend beyond the household level. Objects such as copper, bronze, and iron pots or cauldrons, trays, and altars (chance finds) as well as gold plaques from burial mounds were found from the Talgar area (Arkheologicheskaya Karta Kazakhstana 1960). Where were these items crafted? And certainly highly specialized craftsmen forged and produced such items. Was this production local or regional?

Recent materials analyses of over 1400 ceramic sherds from the Tuzusai excavations of 2012 and 2013 have yielded important results concerning the nature of pottery production (Heinsch 2013). First the local raw materials have very high silt and sand content, but low clay content, therefore the indigenous potters had very poor local materials for crafting pots. In order to compensate for the poor quality of clay and its aplastic qualities, pots were often constructed in molds with overlapping, flattened coils. In the thicker-walled vessels such as storage jugs and cooking vessels, a high amount of inclusions such as crushed granite, organic material, and sand were added to form more durable vessels. Evidence of the recycling and re-use of pottery vessels such as plates, bowls, and jars are apparent

from the frequent mend-holes found in ceramic sherds. The local potters therefore had specialized knowledge in order to work with the poor local materials. The use of molds for making the coiled pots was one such strategy. The density of sherds per volume of excavation seems moderate, and whole vessels rare. The pots were highly valued objects needed for everyday life: bowls, jars, plates, cups, cooking kettles and storage jars. They were not 'elite' items but highly valued objects that were difficult to craft, replace, or obtain from elsewhere. The crafters who produced these valued objects probably had higher or different status than the subsistence farmers or herders, unless pottery production was part of the local household production system, something we have not yet discerned.

At the Talgar settlements a communal work force was necessary to carry out the following tasks: (1) maintenance of simple channels or irrigation ditches; (2) ceremonial feasting; and (3) construction of elite burial kurgans. How was this communal work force organized and who managed it? A historical analogy for the social organization of Hsiung-nu drawn from Sneath's (2007:115) account of the decimal system as gleaned from the Chinese Chronicler Sima Qian may be relevant here. In this system there were two wings ruled by the emperor. In each wing, right or left, were kings and then the great lords. Below these larger divisions of the 24 lords found in each wing, were chiefs of a thousand, chiefs of a hundred, and chiefs of ten. There is no direct evidence for social organization on the Talgar fan, except to say that the settlements (first-order, second-order, or third-order) are always in close proximity to a linear cluster of burial mounds. Yet it suggests that either a numerical or kin-based system was used to tie an aristocratic elite (of

varying degrees of wealth and status) to the commoners. For the Hsiung-nu as for other groups, such an administrative system was not only for military purposes, but was used for designating the commoners as ‘registered households’ (Sneath 2007:116). The ‘registered households’ placed into such a nested hierarchical system, were the basic communal labor force tied to each ascending level of command: chiefs of ten, chiefs of a hundred, chiefs of a thousand. The spatial distribution of different sized kurgans across the Talgar fan in linear clusters also indicates a hierarchy within the elite burials—the largest burials (80 m in diameter, and 9 m in height) as the highest order aristocrats, while the smaller burial mounds (4 m in diameter, and less than 0.5 m in height), either represented commoner burials or the lowest level of the elite.

In a phenomenological sense, the Iron Age inhabitants lived in a world where the sacred landscape of the burial mounds was interwoven into the mundane activities of households, agricultural fields and pasture lands. The proximity of the linear clusters of the burial kurgans to the Iron Age settlements indicates that the sacred and ritualized attendance to the Dead, also took place amidst the activities of everyday life. These burial landscapes were visible markers of the claims to certain territory. The aristocratic elite established these territorial claims through genealogical ties and social hierarchy. Thus the built environment of linear clusters of kurgans, found in close proximity to the Iron Age settlements on the banks of ancient streambeds was a powerful embodiment of a nested hierarchical system. This hierarchical system was probably reminiscent of Hsiung-nu social

organization, by which aristocratic elites of various ranks were linked directly to commoner households.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the Iron Age social organization of the Talgar fan was hierarchical in nature. Were the commoners attached to the elites buried in the kurgans through kinship or membership to an administrative unit? The kurgan landscape consisting of burial mounds of varying sizes represented a hierarchical social structure ‘writ large’ on the landscape. This sacred landscape also conforms to some of the principles of the ‘nomadic model’ of administration. This will be explained in detail by considering the Mongolian system of appanages described by Atwood (2014).

The concept of the appanage community is useful here. The appanage community was a closed corporate unit controlled by aristocratic elites. Under a leader, commoners were given access to pasture land and protection in exchange for military or labor service, tribute, or taxation. According to Atwood (2014) the appanage was different from a fiefdom insofar as it was tied to the centralized administration of the supreme ruler, and was organized in terms of rights to pasture and as a closed corporate community existing in perpetuity. Although we are uncertain as to whether appanage communities existed during the Iron Age, this is a useful concept for examining the social organization of the Saka or Wusun of Talgar. The appanage community is described as the basic unit of traditional Mongolian society that represented both territorial units of pasture areas and corporate communities of commoners attached to specific aristocratic nobles. Commoners were organized under a banner (large military or political unit), camp

district, or thousand (most important unit in the decimal system). If the centralized government demanded military forces, tribute, or labor service, the aristocratic leaders of each appanage would be expected to contribute from the ranks of their commoners. Atwood (2014) describes Mongolian society during three periods of stability: (1) the Qing Dynasty (1645-1900); (2) the Dyan Khanid period (1510 to 1634); and (3) the Chingghis Qan period (1208-1368) in which the appanage system was operative. In each of these cases a hierarchical system of organization tied the nobility and the commoners to a centralized government. Because Mongolian society was primarily pastoral in orientation, the key factor in organizing the appanage community was the distribution of pasture areas within territorial boundaries. Although the commoners were not related to the nobles through kinship, the commoners were tied to the aristocracy through fictive relations resembling children-parent ties (Atwood 2014). Reverence for their leaders included the necessity to honor the ancestral dead of the nobility. For example in the Mongolian and Kazakh systems there were two strata of people: (1) aristocratic elite who traced their ancestry to the apical head of the state or empire and (2) commoners who were attached to the aristocrats but not through kinship, and also had their own hierarchical system of organization. In Kazakh culture the aristocrats were known as Ak-suyek or White Bone, and they traced their ancestry to Chingghis Khan (Sneath 2007: 128). The Kara-suk or Black Bone also was divided hierarchically into headmen and common folk (Sneath 2007: 217). Therefore the hierarchy represented in the more impressive burial mounds such as the Issyk Golden Warrior tomb could have represented the burials of the aristocratic

leaders of the appanage, while the smaller mounds could belong to local kin groups of commoners who had their own system of hierarchy. The aristocratic leaders of the appanage controlled an entire political territory of grazing and farming land, perhaps the entire Talgar fan. The commoners relied on kinship relations, building smaller burial mounds for their ancestors in close proximity to their hamlets or villages.

This nomadic form of socio-political organization serves as a useful analogy for examining Iron Age Talgar for several reasons. First of all, it could explain both local and regional hierarchies as apparent from burial mound landscapes and the levels of wealth found in the burials themselves. For example the 17-year old youth buried in the Golden Warrior tomb is clear evidence for the ascribed, inherited status of a noble aristocratic leader who held considerable power and dominion within the Issyk fan. Was Golden Warrior's position in the aristocratic hierarchy only limited to the Issyk fan or did it extend to the Talgar region? The symbols of nomadism such as 'animal-style' artifacts, weaponry (daggers and swords), and communal feasting all found in the Gold Warrior burial inventory, yet the economic foundation of local Iron Age society in Issyk and nearby Talgar was settled agro-pastoralism, not mobile pastoralism. The famous adage that a 'pure' nomad is a poor one, could have a corollary: the rich nomad is one who commands the multiple resources and different specializations of those underneath. In this case the corporate community, governed by the aristocratic khan and his relatives, controlled the resources of the political territorial unit. The commoners expressed their allegiance through spiritual and material means. In a religious sense the

commoners participated through ritual and ceremonial up-keep of burial mounds, a funerary cult, and feasting. The commoners contributed tribute and labor service for military purposes or public works. An aristocratic elite used tribute from the commoners such as horses, cattle, sheep and goats or cereal grains to enter into larger exchange networks with the Chinese or other nomadic groups. The ability of the Talgar folk to produce both cereal and livestock allowed them to move in and out of pastoral and farming pursuits in accordance with the changing climatic and economic circumstances. The elite were also able to obtain luxury items such as gold, bronze and iron censers, cauldrons or altars, as well as jewelry and ornaments depicting 'animal-style' decoration. Some luxury items were deposited in the tombs of the elite, but other symbolic or ritual objects were used in important rituals. The large luxury items such as altars, censers, and large three-legged kettles could have been used in rituals or communal feasting, therefore further emphasizing the separation of ritual objects owned by the aristocratic elite from the mundane objects of everyday life.

This is the model that I propose for the Saka or the Wusun state-let extant in the Semirech'ye region. The confederacy or state was 'nomadic' in orientation; its primary goal was to amass territory and military personnel across great distances and geographical regions. In contrast, the centralized, bureaucratic agrarian states lacked the flexibility or military-like organization of the nomadic state, and therefore had difficulty controlling peripheral, outlying areas. For example, the Chinese Dynasties always feared incursions from nomadic states especially at the borderlands. The nomadic polities on the other hand, could easily attack and

withdraw in peripheral regions through the implementation of its nested system of hierarchy of the aristocratic elite, tied through hereditary kin ties to a centralized government or administration. It was always possible for the supreme leaders to consolidate military forces through a decimal-like system; the aristocratic nobility was expected to supply personnel from local territories. The system more or less worked because it allowed a centralized administration and charismatic leaders to subordinate geographically and even culturally distinct territories under a single banner. The strength of the system came from two inherent qualities of a nomadic orientation: (1) the ability of the leadership and aristocratic nobility to organize a single vast territory through a system of appanage communities; and (2) to use both strategies of mobility and flexible political organization to combat outsiders.

The splendid objects of this elite, especially from Golden Warrior's burial inventory, served as the symbolic capital of the larger nomadic polity. The local elite obtained some of this symbolic capital through the pan-regional exchange system. The display of such wealth by the local elite also had an important effect on the commoners, who succumbed to a system of tribute that siphoned off surplus livestock and cereal grain, as well as demanded military and labor service. This wealth was a visible measure of the 'power' and 'charisma' of the local aristocratic leaders and their cosmopolitan 'nomadic' capital, distinct from the mundane objects of the commoners.

The aristocratic elite maintained a territory within the larger confederacy or state that could span diverse landscapes, in ways similar to that of the Mongolian societies of historic periods. The appanage as a concept is very useful, because it

was the basic unit by which large land was distributed to the aristocratic nobles, all of whom could trace their direct ancestry to the banner and supreme leader through kin ties. The political territories then could encompass large populations of commoners who themselves could be organized by kinship and even ranked according to positions of inherited or achieved leadership, but who did have direct kinship ties to the aristocracy. The separation between aristocratic elites and commoners encompasses a fundamental principle. If the aristocratic elite rulers of the appanage were not directly tied to the commoners, but were to a central but mobile administration, then the structure was two-fold. Underneath was a stable group of commoners who produced the necessary products for a subsistence economy. Over the commoners was a ramifying structure that worked on principles of mobility, military organization and tribute. Therefore this de-centered aristocratic hierarchy (banner, camp district, thousand) allowed for the flexibility needed in order to control vast areas, and also to swiftly attack or retaliate against the agrarian bureaucratic core-states such as China. Here the personal dynamism of a charismatic leader paired with his ability to organize his distant 'noble' relatives' resources and personnel into armies and commodities of value (such as riding-horses) forged a formidable 'periphery' against the agrarian core-state.

The Talgar commoners were dependent upon the local aristocratic elite for protection and access to pasture and agricultural land. While the elite extracted tribute, labor, or military service, the commoners were guaranteed spiritual, military, and political protection. At the highest levels of local administration, the aristocracy belonged to larger administrative units of a noble class across a pan-

regional system. The mobility of the nomadic aristocratic class came not only from their swift horse-riding cavalries, but from a particular mind-set prevalent in the nomadic world – the processes of socio-political fusion and fission. Elsewhere pastoral nomadic tendencies toward socio-political fusion and fission have been equated with the segmentary lineage model of East African pastoral groups, an idea that has been rigorously critiqued by Sneath (2007). The flexibility of the appanage presupposes another kind of mechanism – one that is reliant upon the exercise of effective kinship within the aristocracy itself, but not subject to establishing kin relations at the lower stratum of commoners. An administrative leader on any level of the aristocracy needed only extract from the lower stratum, tribute, labor, or military service. This built-in separation allowed the higher levels of aristocracy to be mobile in many senses: politically, socially, and geographically, while the local elite and the commoners were tied to stable, fixed territories. The inherent inequality within the system allowed for leadership that was both dynamic and charismatic. The local elite of Talgar only had to provide labor, military personnel or tribute to the next highest level in the hierarchy. In this sense alone, the appanage system for Iron Age Talgar could explain the complexity of the kurgan and settlement landscapes (Sneath 2007; Atwood 2014). The adherence to nomadic symbols and traditions was essential for both the aristocratic leaders and the commoners on the Talgar fan. These symbols and practices reminded the local populace of their position in a larger, de-centralized nomadic confederacy or state. In much the same way that Kazakhs today distinguish between the *Ak-suyek* (White Bone) or Nobility and the *Karasuk* (Black Bone) or Commoners, the same

divisions may have occurred in ancient Iron Age society in the Talgar region. Even if the Talgar Iron Age confederacies did not operate strictly as an appanage community, the socio-cultural landscape that incorporated burial kurgans into a hierarchical settlement system is indicative of social ranking and inequality. It seems plausible, therefore, to assert the existence of social stratification on the Talgar fan, governed from above by the aristocratic elites and supported from below by farmers, herders and craftsmen. During the mid-Iron Age period when demographic expansion took place on the Talgar fan, two developmental processes took place: (1) farming and herding provided sufficient surpluses that could be circulated in larger regional exchange networks and (2) the commoners were subsumed under a 'nomadic' system of aristocratic elites. The concept of 'the appanage community' as a political territorial unit of an effective closed corporate group whereby land, pasture, and other resources were distributed through the aristocratic elites in a decimal-like system makes sense for the simple reason that it linked commoners to aristocratic leaders. It also explains why the Saka and Wusun confederacies or states were 'nomadic' in orientation, yet incorporated sedentary populations of agro-pastoralists in fertile agricultural areas such as the Talgar fan.

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