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## BULLS AND WAGONS: AN “INNOVATIVE” APPROACH TO REPRESENTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

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*Keywords:* Early-Middle Bronze Age, Maikop culture, Yamnaya culture, wooden wagons, North Caucasus, professional incompetency.

The recently published book on appropriating innovations in prehistoric Eurasia includes in it a chapter entitled “Contextualising Innovation: Cattle Owners and Wagon Drivers in the North Caucasus and Beyond” by a group of authors (Reinhold et al. 2017). The task of analyzing this article is beyond standard academic review because works the level on which this article is written are generally not included in a bibliography, pretending they do not exist. However, this book is issued by a respectable publisher, and the article can be used as a source by scholars and students, reproducing and disseminating the erroneous facts and unsupported statements, adding to other misinformation about steppe prehistory roaming through Western-language publications.

As an example of innovation, the authors choose animal labour, used in the appropriation process by two different groups in “different intellectual discourses” (as it was intended to demonstrate in the text): the Maikop communities, who “selected the powerful driving force – cattle teams – for their burial representations”, and the steppe communities, who “chose to highlight the means of transportation – wagons” (Reinhold et al. 2017, [78]). In the end, the overview of the discussed materials resulted in the following conclusion: “The heterogeneity of burials with animal offerings in the piedmont area and the heterogeneity in the deposition of vehicles in the steppe zone give us no clues to standardised ritual procedure. This strongly suggests that the late 4<sup>th</sup> and the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BC were indeed the appropriation period for animal labour in this area, where there were no standards regulating the proper use of the new techniques” (Reinhold et al. 2017, 94).

The artificiality of the intended goal is clear from the very beginning; the use of draught animals and the wheeled vehicles are treated as the same

invention; without any arguments the wagons in burial rites are set forth as representation of animal traction. And the conclusions came as a natural result of what and how archaeological material was used.

The article is based on two burial complexes from the Stavropol region, one for each group, because of their close absolute dating to the last third of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. For the Maikop communities it is Mar’inskaya-5, kurgan 1, grave 25 (in the text designated as Mar’inskaya 5, grave 25). The grave contained two skulls of bulls/oxen and bronze elements of their harness – previously called “cheek-peaces”, now named the “looped nose rings”. There are over ten more complexes of the Maikop culture with similar rings, without animal skulls. Though they are briefly listed in the text and mapped (pages 81-82, Figure 8.7), the described are the other graves, where cattle skulls were found, none of which belonged to the Maikop culture. Even though the text has a section with theoretical quotes on innovations, their preconditions, and challenges, there is no definition, however, as to how long invention can be considered as such. So, the initially stated discourse of the Maikop communities was stretched for another 700 years, and the large-scale conclusions about “heterogeneity of burials with animal offerings in the piedmont area” were made on six complexes: one grave of the Maikop culture, two graves of the North Caucasian culture, and one grave of the Catacomb culture, all from the same kurgan; two more Middle Bronze Age graves were added from another kurgan cemetery in the same region. The complexes with looped bronze rings were not explored, but simply explained away that their “presentation accentuates the subjection of the animal” (page 87). Due to an insufficient amount of burials, the other archaeological data was cited, putting everything in one basket: wall painting scene with bulls from Arslantepe, symbolism of bulls in the North Caucasus (of course with bull figurines and plaques from the

Maikop kurgan but adding to the bunch the lion plaques as well), and a kurgan complex of graves with undefined attribution from northern Osetia.

Discussing the symbolism of the bull, themes of “mastering the beast”, “subjection of the animal”, and other bull-related material; suggesting distinction in “different intellectual discourses in appropriation process”, the one important grave was excluded from a survey – Novokorsunskaya 2/18 (*aka* Starokorsunskaya 2/18, see Izbitser 2017), perhaps, because this grave of the late Maikop/Novosvobodnaya period does not fit into the scheme – it was accompanied by a wagon, not animal skulls. Information about the grave has been included in publications by A. Gei (Геї 2000, 189) and V. Trifonov, who provided its drawing and description (Trifonov 2004, 168, Abb. 2), works which should be known to the authors because they are cited in the article. However, the grave was not even mentioned in the text, only listed on a map under number (1) near the symbol for a Novotitarovskaya grave (Figure 8.7).

To demonstrate the steppe traditions of burials with wagons the authors chose kurgan 2 from Sharakhalsun-6 cemetery, which contained four graves with remains of wooden wagons. It should be noted that for an unknown reason, the cemetery Sharakhalsun-6 throughout the text, with few exceptions, is referred as Sharakhalsun 2, and kurgan 6 as kurgan 2, while labels in field photographs of the graves clearly display the factual designation (Figure 8.10, 2; Figure 8.11, 2-3).

Out of four graves with wagons, special attention is paid to grave 18, whose radiocarbon date “is almost identical with grave 25 at Mar’inskaya” (page 83). It is a catacomb grave, where a wagon and the deceased in a sitting position in it were placed in the chamber. On this ground it was linked to the “early Yamnaya or steppe Maikop culture”. Since there were no burial goods, it was decided that “the unique burial position makes it difficult to assign the grave to a specific archaeological culture on the basis of burial customs. It belongs to a small group of intermediate burials in sitting position with both early Yamnaya and Maikop aspects” (page 84).

However, these are exactly the features of burial rite that raise doubt about both cultural and chronological attribution, namely: the position of the wagon, the catacomb construction of the grave, and combination of these two features. To

start with, a grave in a catacomb cannot belong to the Yamnaya culture. As it well known, the culture was named by V.A. Gorodtsov over a hundred years ago, according to the the formal shape of the graves – “yama”, that is “pit” in English and “Grube” in German, and it still applies. To attribute a catacomb grave to the early Yamnaya culture is a kind of novelty. In regard to the assumption on the connection of grave 18 to the Maikop culture, it should be noted that despite the fact that catacombs were one of the forms of grave construction known for this culture, wooden wagons on the early stage of the burial rite were always dismantled before their depositions into the graves. The analysis of several hundred kurgan burials with remains of wooden wagons dated to the Early-Middle Bronze Age revealed that the arrangement of wagons and their place in grave constructions reflects both cultural and chronological aspects (Избицер 1993). The deposition of the fully assembled wagon in a chamber of a catacomb is a characteristic of the Middle Bronze Age period.

If we turn to the field report of excavations of the Sharakhalsun-6, the last part contains the table of distribution of the excavated graves by chronological groups; grave 18, kurgan 2 is in the Middle Bronze Age group (Яковлев 2004, 185). Besides that, the table of graves with remains of wagons excavated by expeditions of *Nasledie* (it was provided to me at the *Nasledie* office in 2011) has a column with cultural definition of the graves and a column indicating materials, if selected, for future radiocarbon tests. A culture for the grave Sharakhalsun-6 2/18 is indicated there as “the Catacomb culture (late stage?)”, and the selected material – “bones”. Meanwhile, Table 8.2 in the text, while listing the graves with remains of wooden wagon and the results of the <sup>14</sup>C analyses, states that material used for the dating of grave 18 was wood (Table 8.2, page 87). This gives us a reason to assume that at some stage packages with samples were mislabeled, and wood came from a different grave, not from the “oldest wooden vehicle dated so far” (page 94).

Also incorrect is the statement that a sitting position of the deceased in the wagon is unique. This situation is rare but not unique. A similar burial was discovered in 1970 in a kurgan near the village of Voikovo, the Lower Dnieper region – a wooden wagon and a seated in it deceased were placed in the chamber of the catacomb (Пустовалов 2000;

Тесленко 2017). Another example – the famous grave 8 of kurgan 9 from the Tri Brata I cemetery in Kalmykia. One of two wagons was disassembled, with wheels laid flat near the top corner of the pit but the deceased was left at the bottom of the pit in a sitting position on a wooden platform (Синицын 1948). Besides a logical guess that the wooden platform was the bottom of the wagon box, for such an interpretation speaks of a similar arrangement of the dismantled wagons known not only in the North Caspian region but in the North Black Sea region as well. The reliable clue to interpret the wooden platforms beneath the skeletons as remains of wagon boxes is witnessed in Kholmokoe, kurgan 1, grave 7 excavated by the Izmail Expedition in the Odessa region in 1978. Wheels there were placed flat at the top corners of the pit, and the skeleton laying on the wagon box that preserved its sledge-like construction was unearthed at the bottom of the pit (Новицкий 1985); the find itself is one of the earliest archaeological evidence on the origin of wagons from sledges.

The methodology of drawing conclusions on a limited number of data applied to the Maikop graves, combined with speculative suggestions, is also conducted in the discussion on the injuries and lifetime occupation of the individual buried in Sharakhalsun-6 2/18. Based on the position of the skeleton's hands, the deceased is declared “a wagon driver” and supposedly an active trainer of cattle team (Reinhold et al. 2017, 91-92). Besides the article in question, another work, with the primary focus on the study of numerous traumatic injuries the buried suffered before his death, was published (Tucker et al. 2017); both articles cross-reference each other. They are written by the same core team of authors, appeared in the same year, and (it would seem) to share the same views. However, while one article states that the skeleton's “fracture pattern is reminiscent of combat rather than everyday activities” (Reinhold et al. 2017, 91), the other concludes that “typical aetiology of these injuries would suggest that this may have been a fall from a wagon, with subsequent crushing by the vehicle landing on top of them, or “overrun” of a wheel across the chest of the individual, an accident involving their draft animals, or a combination of all three” (Tucker et al. 2017, 16). This dramatic scenario is no less creative in the explanation of the burial: “The survival and recovery of the individual, despite the severity of

his injuries, would probably have been a notable event in the community and it is interesting to speculate whether the unique positioning of the individual in his grave, sitting on a wagon rather than buried in a supine position underneath the wagon box, was some form of commemoration of the event” (Tucker et al. 2017, 16). When discussing this specific burial, neither of the articles offers any explanation on the rest of several hundred burials accompanied by one wagon or, in a number of cases, by two wagons: Were the other buried individuals also “wagon drivers” or only the one with broken bones? Do the types of injuries imply that in the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BC a wagon was the only place where a person could fall from and get traumas similar to those traced on the skeleton from Sharakhalsun-6 2/18?

One of the above-mentioned quotes describes the supine position of the deceased underneath the wagon box. However, out of over 300 graves with wooden wagons there was no skeleton traced underneath of the wagon box. This incorrect description is, perhaps, another way of referring to a variant of the wagon's location in graves mentioned in Reinhold et al.'s text as “wagon boxes used as grave ceilings”, or in regard to two graves of the Yamnaya culture, “four wheels were placed flat in the corners of the burial pit, which in turn was covered with the wooden wagon box” (page 85). But everyone who excavated the grave pits of the Yamnaya culture, without the wagon or with it, knows that pits were covered with wooden beams and mats. When dismantled, the arrangement of the wagon in the graves was as follows: wheels were removed from the axles and placed flat near them, on both sides of the wagon box, or near the corner of the pit; the wagon box was left on top of the pit's covering, and its remains fell inside the pit after the beams decayed. Wagons boxes could not serve as ceilings for a simple reason: in the most cases they were smaller than pits.

In general, the text gives an impression that whoever compiled has a vague understanding of the subjects discussed in the article but carelessly obtained the information from various sources, and largely in retold fashion. In a number of instances, the cited publications do not contain the referred information. For example, with reference to the book by A. Gei the Novotitarovskaya culture is named as “a variant of the Yamnaya phenomenon” (page 86), while Gei talks only about traceable components of both Yamnaya and No-

vosvobodnaya in the shaping of the Novotitarovskaya, and stresses that a problem of its origin is far from conclusion (Гей 2000, 198-201). In another place, discussing bull figurines from the Maikop kurgan one can read that “as recent research by Juri Ju. Piotrovsky on the placement of the objects in this grave demonstrate, the famous baldachin mooted in one of the earliest publications obviously never existed”, with references to Munchaev and Piotrovsky & Bochkarev (page 90), but neither of these works even mentions the baldachin; an article on this subject was published by M. Chernopitsky back in 1987 (Чернопицкий 1987). The number of wagon burials excavated in the North Caucasus is given as 260-280 (page 91), while the cited article of Belinsky [sic] and Kalmykov of 2004 talks about 160 graves, and Kaiser in her work of 2007 mentions 250 graves between the Urals and the lower Danube, not in the North Caucasus (Kaiser 2007, [129]).

A few words should also be said about the illustrations. Some maps and diagrams either have symbols that are not included in the legend (Figures 8.3, 8.7) or symbols in the legend that are not on the diagram (Figure 8.9). In other cases illustrations differ from its description in the text; for example, Figure 8.9 indicates that 1<sup>st</sup> embankment belongs to the Maikop period and 2-4/5 embankments – to the Yamnaya culture, however the text says that 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> embankments relate to the Maikop period and 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> – to the Yamnaya culture (page 84). On the other hand, for both Mar’inskaya-5, kurgan 1, and Sharakhalsun-6, kurgan 2, the conclusions on the chronological sequence of the burials are not supported by the drawings of balks. The caption under Figure 8.8 designates the grave as from the Caucasian Catacomb culture, while there is no culture under this name. The catacomb grave in Figure 8.10 designated as “the grave shaft”. To say, this confusion between “catacomb”, “shaft”, and “chamber” could be seen throughout the text. And when the text says that the wagon was in the shaft instead of the chamber, it is misleading because there are catacomb graves where a wagon was placed at the bottom of the shaft. The caption under Figure 8.13, (1) says “Plan” instead of “Section”, and captions under Figure 8.11 is hard to understand: out of three illustrations the only clear one is under number 1; for number 2 – photo of Sharakhalsun-6 2/4 stands “2<sup>nd</sup> (wagon)”, and for number 3 – Sharakhalsun-6 2/9 stands “6<sup>th</sup> (burial)”. But

a “champion” in errors is Figure 8.7: the “Early wagon” section incorrectly names the site under number (11) – Baturinsk instead of Baturinsky, and motives behind the indication of number of kurgan/grave near some sites are unclear, since practically all of them are not single kurgans but cemeteries where wagons were found either in several graves of the same kurgan, or in different kurgans of the same cemetery. In the “Loop noose ring” section two distant places are marked with black circles and are shown under the same number (4), one of them for Klady; the gray circle on the map surrounded by several numbers is not in the legend; finds for (4) Klady are incorrectly given as K4/1, K1/25, K27/1 instead of Klady K4/1, K11/26, K11/26, offering place. Maybe these mistakes came from the original source indicated as “Korenevsky 2013” but it is difficult to check because the work is not included in the bibliography; also not included is a book by Rezepkin which several times is referenced in the text as Rezepkin 2012.

In a situation where there were one or two errors, they could be disregarded. But all the above-mentioned inconsistencies are not just inaccuracies and shortcomings; they are systematic errors that show a low level of professionalism, and question whether the authors understand all the issues they decided to take the responsibility of writing about. The examples mentioned do not conclude the list of errors and drawbacks of this text, which could still be described on many pages. Of course, it is impossible to stop people to write articles of similar quality, but authors should understand that they are responsible for all they publish.

The text has nine authors. Among them are the names of established scholars with decades of experience, firm knowledge of North Caucasian prehistory, and long lists of scholarly publications. Were these scholars in fact the authors of the text and/or approved it? Talking about appropriating innovations in prehistory the article itself demonstrates the application of a number of “innovations” in scholarly publications: the absence of basic research methodology; deep lack of knowledge of excavated materials but only surface familiarity with the discussed subjects and cited publications; abundance of errors and unsupported conclusions, in some cases reaching the level of absurdity. The question arises: Why innovate?

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## Tauri și care: o abordare „inovatoare” în prezentarea materialelor arheologice

*Cuvinte-cheie:* perioada timpurie-mijlocie a epocii bronzului, cultura Maikop, cultura Yamnaya, care din lemn, Caucazul de Nord, incompetență profesională.

*Rezumat:* O culegere publicată recent, dedicată inovațiilor în antichitate, include un capitol în care sunt discutate diferite modalități de reflectare în ritualul funerar al culturilor arheologice de la sfârșitul mileniului IV a. Chr. a utilizării forței de tracțiune a animalelor – prezența craniilor de vite mari cornute în unele cazuri, și a carelor – în altele (Reinhold et al. 2017). Concluziile articolului se reduc la următoarele: diversitatea locurilor de depunere a craniilor de animale în mormintele din regiunile submontane ale Caucazului de Nord și diversitatea în amplasarea carelor în mormintele din regiunile de stepă indică la lipsa unor standarde în ritualul funerar la etapa timpurie de utilizare a forței de tracțiune. La baza primelor generalizări globale stau materialele descoperite într-un mormânt din arealul culturii Maikop – Mar'inskaya-5, tumulul 1, mormântul 25 (în textul articolului – Mar'inskaya 5, grave 25), unde au fost descoperite două crani de tauri/boi cu piese de harnașament, și câteva morminte ale culturii nordcaucaziene. Afirmațiile cu privire la mormintele cu care subliniază, însă, o utilizare formală a materialului publicat, precum și o necunoaștere și, respectiv, o neînțelegere a culturilor arheologice. Astfel, mormântul culturii Katakombnaya din perioada mijlocie a epocii bronzului Sharakhalsun-6, tumulul 2, mormântul 18 (în text – Sharakhalsun 2/6, Grave 18), în care a fost descoperit un defunct depus pe car, a fost atribuit culturii Yamnaya și considerat eronat drept cea mai timpurie înmormântare cu car în regiunile de stepă. În unele cazuri, în articolul menționat, sunt făcute trimiteri la publicații rusești și germane în care informația prezentată nu se conține sau este redată denaturat.

Deopotrivă cu aspectele profesionale există și o altă problemă care se evidențiază în publicația analizată – cea etică. În lista autorilor acestui articol sunt incluse numele unor arheologi din Rusia care au o vastă experiență de muncă și care cunosc foarte bine antichitățile Caucazului de Nord. În același timp caracterul greșelilor comise de cel care a scris articolul, indică clar că textul nu a fost văzut de către aceștia înainte de a fi publicat. Permisivitatea de a fi trecute numele pe o publicație și, respectiv, împărțirea responsabilității pentru neprofesionalism, este alegerea fiecăruia.

### **Быки и повозки: «новаторский подход» к обзору археологических данных**

*Ключевые слова:* эпоха ранней-средней бронзы, майкопская культура, ямная культура, деревянные повозки, Северный Кавказ, профессиональная некомпетентность.

*Резюме:* Недавно опубликованный сборник, посвященный инновациям в древности, включает главу, в которой обсуждаются различные способы отражения в погребальном обряде археологических культур конца 4 тыс. до н.э. применения тягловой силы животных – присутствие черепов крупного рогатого скота в одних случаях, и повозок – в других (Reinhold et al. 2017). Выводы статьи свелись к следующему: разнообразие в месте черепов животных в погребениях предгорной зоны Северного Кавказа и разнообразие в расположении повозок в погребениях степной зоны указывают на отсутствие стандартов в погребальном обряде рассматриваемых культур на раннем этапе использования упряжных животных. В основе первой части этих глобальных обобщений лежат материалы одного погребения майкопской культуры – Марьинская-5, курган 1, погребение 25 (в тексте – Mar'inskaya 5, grave 25), где были открыты два черепа быков/волово с предметами упряжи, и нескольких погребений северокавказской культуры. Утверждение же относительно погребений с повозками подчеркивает формальное использование опубликованного материала, так же как незнание и, соответственно, непонимание археологических культур. Катакомбное погребение средней бронзы Шарахалсун-6, курган 2, погребение 18 (в тексте – Sharakhalsun 2/6, Grave 18), с находящимся в повозке скелетом, размещенными в камере погребения, приписано к ямной культуре и ошибочно объявлено самым ранним погребением с повозкой в степи. В ряде случаев указаны ссылки на русские и немецкие публикации, в которых приведенная информация не содержится или искажена при передаче в тексте статьи. Помимо профессиональных аспектов существует еще одна проблема, предельно проявившаяся в рассматриваемой публикации – этическая. Список авторов включает имена российских археологов с многолетним опытом полевой и кабинетной работы, со знанием древностей Северного Кавказа. В то же время характер ошибок, допущенных составителем текста, явно указывает на то, что текст перед публикацией другим авторам показан не был. Позволять ли использовать свое имя, и тем самым разделять ответственность за непрофессиональные публикации, или остановить подобную практику, уже становящуюся тенденцией – выбор каждого.

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