

URBAN-LIKE EVIDENCES OF LARGE AGGLOMERATIONS IN BRONZE AGE CENTRAL KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract. This paper reconsiders the archaeological picture and the involved historical narratives proposed by important seasons of excavations at the second-millennium BC site of Kent (Kazakhstan). Thanks to these intensive efforts the site is and will remain crucial for the reconstruction of the evolution of social complexity in Central Asia and the neighbouring civilizations; however, we question the validity of some assumptions and interpretations concerning the urban character of the discoveries. Finally, the paper proposes some new hypotheses which might be tested by future fieldwork.

Keywords: Kent, Bronze Age, Central Kazakhstan, Urbanisation in the Eurasian Steppe.

Anyone wishing to investigate socio-cultural interactions in prehistoric Central Asia will soon be able to refer to one of the many papers on this wide topic written by Viktor V. Varfolomeev. I am honoured to be able to contribute to this volume with a paper that focuses on the definition and characterisation of the urban centres in the central Eurasian steppes, mainly in Central Kazakhstan, as an intensification of prehistoric socio-cultural processes across Eurasia. This is a view which Viktor himself advocated; he insisted that interactions are critical to ongoing local change and evolution. He passed this on to me, when, as a Director of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Kazakhstan, I had the great opportunity of visiting and joining the excavations of Kent, Aksu-ayuli, Akkesen and other sites. His precise and rational teachings accompanied me throughout the writing of some papers dedicated to the trajectories of evolution and development of the complex societies across Bronze Age Eurasia. I am deeply grateful to Viktor.

The socio-anthropological and architectural study that invests the definition and characterisation of the urban centres in the central Eurasian steppes, mainly in Central Kazakhstan, is today of crucial importance firstly because several excavations and surveys of this region of Central Kazakhstan have been carried out up to now, which however, have attracted little scholarly attention thus far, are almost unknown to international scholars and then, in hindsight, makes this area as a *terra incognita* from an archaeological and historical point of view, particularly for international researchers, as already stated. Secondly, some sites (Kent, Akkesen and Semiyarka), having very specific and peculiar features, have been identified and excavated in recent years. These discoveries allowed to present them

as unique sites in the Bronze Age of Kazakhstan, as they were described as actual steppe cities of the 2nd millennium BC characterised by architectural, cultural and anthropic features typical of an urban center [Varfolomeev 2003; Varfolomeev et al. 2017].

Urbanism, as pointed out by many scholars, is an exceedingly prickly concept to define [Childe 1950: 3; Marcus and Sabloff 2008: 12], and there is still no generally accepted cross-cultural or interdisciplinary definition for it [Cowgill 2004: 525; Trigger 2003; 2008: 53]. Definitions of “cities” and urban sites have been based upon various attributes, descriptions and criteria. Some of them clearly state social differentiation, multiple and centralised functions or institutions, political and economic hegemony over a surrounding farming area, and urban/rural binary dualism. They also have spatial connotations with cities as central places surrounded by their productive hinterland. The multiple functions of a city are emphasised by some authors [Mumford 1961], while others point out that the great variety of urban forms makes a morphological description of a city problematic, and so they characterised cities rather as “clusters of institutions” [Wheatley 1972]. Morphological definitions of urban sites have made much of site size and diversity of building types [Kostof 1991]. Others have included axial planning, organisation of spaces into grids or city blocks and a high density of structures, as urban attributes. Features that have been considered important urban characteristics include a citadel, a core of monumental religious and administrative buildings, public open spaces such as city squares or fora, marketplaces, city walls and monumental gateways [Wright 1977; 1984; 2006]. Notwithstanding, Oates et al. suggested that: *“Recent work seems to accept urbanism as a more fuzzy concept, characterised by a cluster of variables that are best considered along axes of degree rather than simple presence or absence”* [Oates et al. 2007: 598].

Now we analyse some markers chosen to identify the urban character of the sites. Specifically, the site of Kent is the subject on which our analysis focuses and on which we will try to understand which urban attributes it possesses and to what extent.

The first marker relates to the area occupied by an urban site, which is more than 15 hectares, according to scholars who deal with urbanism in steppe protohistory. Kent was less than 30 hectares in extension and it was the largest by far in the whole region. In other words, Kent is much larger than all the other sites in the Karkaralinsk as well as Saryarka region. This is a very important urban feature, which has been overlooked: site size, being far larger than surrounding, contemporary sites.

The second marker concerns the density of population inhabiting an urban site at the same time. It is important to quantify the total number of inhabitants in a space in order to determine its urban character – ca. 5.000 inhabitants according to scholars who deal with urbanism in steppe protohistory -, as well as the relationship between the number of individuals and square meters occupied, or the population density. Moreover, the density should be far higher than surrounding, contemporary sites. Based on an approximate calculation of the identified and excavated residential structures, the number of inhabitants in Kent is estimated between 2500 and 3000 over an area of less than 30 hectares. The urban character appears in this case weak and unclear; however, the number of unidentified and unexcavated dwellings could change this assessment in the future. Moreover, the results of the excavations of the site of Akkesen, carried out in the latest years by V.V. Varfolomeev, could change our point of view. Kent bears a striking similarity with the ca. 40 ha settlement of Semiyarka located along the Irtysh river valley in the Semipalatinsk region. Excavated by V.K. Merts [Merts 2006], who brought to light a compact group of several dozen square, rectangular and round pit-houses, and a large rectangular fence. Furthermore, a comparison may be made between the sites of Kent and Semiyarka and the Chalcolithic gigantic sites (or mega sites) in Ukraine and northern Moldova, in the forest-steppe region between the Bug and Middle Dniester rivers, such as Tal'yanki, Dobrovody, Kosenovka, Veselyi Kut, Miropol'e, and Majdanetzkoe. In these latter sites there is no indication of urban markers such as evidence of specialisation and internal social differentiation, population density as well as the presence of administrative devices and bureaucratic activities and thus most scholars have eschewed the term “cities” and have referred to these incredibly large nucleated settlements as “giant sites” or “gigantic settlements” [Kohl 2007].

According to scholars who deal with urbanism in steppe protohistory, the third evidence of urban character is identified in the presence of agricultural production and activities in the villages located around the main site. In our opinion, this is not an important marker highlighting the urban nature of the site. Rather much more crucial is the demonstration that an urban center served as a hub or nexus: a true city should act as a node or meeting place for mercantile transactions (marketplace) and communications and connections with other sites/cultures/groups [Renfrew 2008]. The relationship between the rural area around Kent and the main site has not been thoroughly analysed.

The fourth marker is identified in the presence of workshops, artisanship structures and other evidence (metallurgical furnaces, foundry

waste, tools and scraps of bone manufacturing and working) located in a separate quarter within the settlement. The presence of centralised or specialised production activities, as well as the diversification in function of the buildings are both crucial proof of the urban nature of a large site [Tosi 1984]. The segregation of these production workshops seems to be well marked in Kent, while there is no evidence of centralisation and control operated by an administrative agent or central authority.

The fifth marker relates to trade interactions and the presence of imported artefacts. At the site of Kent, where pots and vases of the Sargary-Alekseev ware represent the bulk of pottery production, different traditions of vessels with applied rollers (*valikovaya keramika*), Elovka- and Irmen-culture pottery as well as wheel-thrown southern Central Asian pottery are attested, denoting the wide range of contacts and socio-cultural links established by the inhabitants of Kent. Based on these diversified pottery productions, the excavators propose that the composition of inhabitants was mixed, but this assessment is not supported by physical anthropological analysis of the skeletons from the burial ground of the site.

The sixth and last marker identified by the scholars dealing with urbanism in steppe protohistory, which denotes the urban character of the settlement of Kent is represented by religious architectural buildings. Also in this case, the presence of a temple, church, sanctuary, small or large place of worship or other religious construction represents the distinction between an urban space and a village in a rural context. In our opinion, the presence of monumental architecture (pyramid, stepped pyramid, ziggurat, palaces, buildings built over large terraces) is much more discriminating; the construction of large structures implies that the whole urban community was engaged in the architectural project for some weeks or months during the year, as suggested by some researchers [Tosi 1973; 1977; Biscione, Tosi 1979]. It is possible that the two buildings excavated at Kent, known as Great Fence 1 and 2, served as places for public religious and ceremonial activities. However, there is little proof supporting the religious function of these two buildings.

Most of the researchers engaged in the anthropological analysis of the evolution of complex societies agree that the identification of administrative and bureaucratic activities and services [Masson 1981; Rothman 2004] is a very important marker denoting the urban character of a site. Seals and sealings, tokens and other counting devices, bullae, terracotta tablets with and without inscriptions, as well as document archives are very important objects to this regard. They highlight the socio-economic relations between the numerous citizens of the center and the necessity to keep and record

trade interactions in order to avoid inequalities, disparities and disputes and to respect the laws established for the community [Tosi 1986; Fiandra 1981; Schmandt-Besserat 1991]. This type of evidence is lacking at Kent, as well as in other coeval sites across the Eurasian Steppe. However, it may be surmised that organic material such as tree leaves and the leather of some animals, which archaeologically are preserved only in exceptional cases, was used across the steppe expanse to produce administrative devices and other bureaucratic instruments.

To conclude, it appears that there is little concrete evidence to support the theory that Kent was an actual city of the 2nd millennium BC. On the contrary, we must think that Kent, just like Semiyarka and Akkesen, was a large agglomeration of different communities and/or extended families of the steppes, which had different characteristics compared to the large cities of the 3rd millennium BC in the Near and Middle East, such as Ur, Uruk, Nineveh, Tepe Hissar, Altyn-depe, Shahr-i Sokhta, Shahdad, Sarazm, and others. When dealing with the topic of urbanism in protohistory, it is necessary to think that urbanism existed in the Near and Middle East, existed as well as in Middle Asia with local features, but also existed in the Eurasian steppes with evidences very similar to large and extended agglomerations of numerous building of different functions inhabited by several families of diverse origin. As was previously stated, the large site of Kent could reasonably be compared with the late Chalcolithic gigantic- or mega-sites of the Tripol'e culture of the northern Ukrainian steppe, discarding the misleading neo-evolutionary term "urban" as it morphologically only has two building-types, pit-houses and the so-called great fences, and large open areas devoid of structures.

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СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВА СУЩЕСТВОВАНИЯ КРУПНЫХ ГОРОДСКИХ АГЛОМЕРАЦИЙ БРОНЗОВОГО ВЕКА В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОМ КАЗАХСТАНЕ

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается исторический и археологический контекст протогорода Кент (Центральный Казахстан), полученный в результате многолетних раскопок на этом памятнике, датированном серединой-концом II тыс. до н. э. Благодаря интенсивным раскопкам и усилиям ученых этот памятник имеет решающее значение для реконструкции социально-экономического процесса в Центральной Азии и взаимодействия с соседними синхронными археологическими культурами. Автор статьи ставит под сомнение обоснованность некоторых предположений и интерпретаций, касающихся городского характера поселения Кент. Предлагаются некоторые новые гипотезы, которые должны быть проверены в процессе будущих полевых исследований.

Ключевые слова: Кент, бронзовый век, Центральный Казахстан, урбанизация, Евразия, степи.