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“Bronze Age Inhabitation, Mobility, and Displacement among the first farming herders of highland Inner Asia: case studies from Eastern Kazakhstan”

For over 15 years, the Dzhungar Mountains Archaeology project carried out excavations of multi-period campsites built by nomadic pastoralists living throughout the highlands of Inner Asia. One surprising discovery was that these small-scale settlements showed incredibly long durations of reuse. Most had been repeatedly abandoned, reoccupied, re-modeled, and reused for roughly 4000 years, challenging the idea that nomadic societies built only ephemeral settlements. Instead, what emerged from the array of archaeological sites and materials was evidence of an articulated network of places that together shaped historically rich landscapes, packed with meaningful places for local communities of herd-ers. Delving deeper into the archaeological remains, the last 5 years of research in this region has yielded even more data concerning how mobile pastoralists shaped their world in the mountains of Inner Asia, and why. In particular, the discovery of the earliest known domestic grains and the first evidence for the integration of farming, recently documented at these very campsites, allows us to revise our understanding of Bronze Age economic strategies across Eurasia and to rethink how commodities, from grains to metals to textiles, were dislocated from their respective sources, revamped, and redeployed in newly emerging systems of inter-regional engagement and participation. This paper presents case studies from Eastern Kazakhstan that illustrate how dynamic conditions of inhabitation, mobility, and displacement transformed Bronze Age Eurasia at local and global scales.

Michael Frachetti is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. His research focuses on the dynamic strategies of nomadic societies living in the steppes, mountains, and deserts of Central and Eastern Eurasia, from prehistory to more recent times. He is the author of Pastoralist Landscapes and Social Interaction in Bronze Age Eurasia (UCPress, 2008). He currently directs archaeological field research in Eastern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

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