

Northwestern route of kurganization. Bronze Age expansion of steppe communities (3000–1200 BC)

The emergence of kurgans (barrows) on the vast Eurasian Steppe, bordering forest-steppe or the forest zone extending further north and west was usually linked to pastoral communities or mobile herders. Kurgans, frequently forming extensive cemeteries, were above all instances of funerary architecture, but their significance went beyond this function. In the steppe zone, they were hubs of social life and landmarks (pyramids of the steppe) because they could be seen from a large distance in the flat landscape along the routes of periodic treks of people and livestock from river valleys to pastures in the steppe interior and back.

The principal aim of the project is to explain and interpret comprehensively the mechanisms and course of the process known in literature as kurganization. It is held to mean not only the spread of the custom of raising kurgans – a characteristic funerary ritual of steppe cultures – but also the transfer of a whole package of cultural patterns (chiefly related to ritual life) from as far as the Caspian and Black Sea steppes. The main research problem is to identify what and how was transmitted ‘west’ from the communities of Black Sea kurgan cultures in the Bronze Age (c. 3000–1200 BC). Special attention will be given to the question of the ‘northwestern route’ of the spreading of the patterns in question from the most likely area of departure of the steppe impulse – located between the lower Dnieper and lower Boh rivers. The contemplated investigations should answer the question whether the emergence of steppe traits far west was an effect of mass migration from the steppes or a result of the accumulation of diverse forms of impact (including migrations of small population groups) by the communities of the so-called Yamnaya (Pit-Grave) culture and the populations of subsequent steppe cultural groups.

The project will make use of a broad range of methods typical of both the humanities and natural sciences. Diverse specialist analyses will be performed such as archaeometric analyses of artefacts, radiocarbon determinations, anthropological, archaeozoological and isotope studies (the last mentioned ones help determine the diet of people buried in kurgans and whether they spent their lives in one place or migrated) or genetic examinations (they help establish connections with other communities and the consanguinity of people buried in kurgans). Finally, various soil tests will be carried out (as for instance kurgan soil tests). The results of all these analyses and tests will give an insight into kurganization and explain its mechanisms and the course it took. Specifically, they will determine the role of the northwestern route along which the cultural pattern package of steppe kurgan cultures spread west.