Long-Term Occupation and Seasonal Mobility in Mongolia: A Comparative Study of Two Mobile Pastoralist Communities

Jean-Luc Houle

An important aspect of the development of more complex forms of social organization was the emergence of larger more integrated communities that structured human interaction in new ways. These larger-scale and more complex societies (i.e. societies with greater horizontal and/or vertical social differentiation) frequently, but not always, came into existence after the establishment of sedentary agricultural life. Why? Because, in part, it allowed for more regular and sustained face-to-face interaction – the primary mechanism by which society is reproduced and transformed. And in many cases, once demographic scale grew beyond the organizational capacity of personal relationships in face-to-face interaction, more complex means of organization were needed, leading to supra-local communities, often characterized by social (and political) centralization that transcended the purely local scale. However, there is also plenty of archaeological evidence indicating that many mobile pastoralist societies in the past also exhibited complex features of social organization. Evidence of elaborate burials, wide-scale trade networks, the production and circulation of prestige goods, and large-scale communal projects have all been linked to such developments on the Eurasian steppe. The question remains, however, under what circumstances can mobile pastoralists develop and sustain larger and more complex social organizations? Of particular interest to this issue is the problem of social integration among populations that are often characterized as being highly mobile, as having low population densities, and as having dispersed settlements. Integration under such conditions can be challenging.

This chapter compares settlement data as well as data from burial and ritual sites in two different regions of Mongolia in order to investigate similarities.

2 Drennan and Peterson 2008.
and differences in the nature of human social communities during the pivotal Bronze and Iron Age periods. Both regions have evidence for the development of very similar types of early complex societies that apparently shared a common integrative ritual system, indexed by the same types of monumental ritual structures (khirigsuurs and deer stone sites; see descriptions below), but followed different trajectories in terms of socio-political development. In one region, communities became integrated within a state-like structure known as the Xiongnu Empire, while no such complex social organization developed in the other region. The chapter discusses several important axes of variation in community organization, in order to understand under what circumstances mobile pastoralists managed to develop a complex social organization that eventually led to statehood in one region, but not in the other. As a first analytical step, the focus is on comparing some of the currently available archaeological evidence directly relevant to a better understanding of the social organization of these communities: the structure of the local communities (size, compactness, and degree of mobility/permanence) and investment in public works (labor and resource investment in mortuary and ritual sites). Local ethnographic data is also discussed in order to elucidate some of the archaeological patterns.

The communities considered here are located in the Khanuy River Valley region of north central Mongolia and in the western Khoton Lake region of the Mongolian Altai (Fig. 6.1). The abundance and quality of archaeological data currently available in both regions is uneven, though a decade of settlement pattern research and work at mortuary and ritual sites in Khanuy Valley has produced a much more comprehensive understanding of the Bronze and Iron Age periods in this region. In contrast, our knowledge of the Altai region of western Mongolia is somewhat patchier due to an archaeology that has focused almost exclusively on monumental ritual structures, burials, and rock art. The more ‘mundane’ habitation sites in this region have only just begun to be investigated. Some information from this preliminary settlement data has implications for how we might reconsider some archaeological indicators of stability, integration and community organization, and their possible effects on the development of more complex social systems.

4 Houle 2009; Houle 2010.