

Rethinking the social structure of ancient Eurasian nomads

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Prehistoric Eurasian nomads are commonly perceived as horse riding bandits who utilized their mobility and military skill to antagonize ancient civilizations such as the Chinese, Persians, and Greeks. Although some historical accounts may support this view, a new article by Dr. Michael Frachetti (Washington University, St. Louis) illustrates a considerably different image of prehistoric pastoralist societies and their impact on world civilizations more than 5000 years ago.

In the article, recently published in the February issue of [Current Anthropology](#), Frachetti argues that early pastoral nomads grew distinct economies across the steppes and mountains of Eurasia and triggered the formation of some the earliest and most extensive networks of interaction in prehistory. The model for this unique form of interaction, which Frachetti calls "nonuniform" institutional complexity, describes how discrete institutions among small-scale societies significantly impact the evolution of wider-scale political economies and shape the growth of great empires or states.

Around 3500 BC, regionally distinct herding economies were found across the Eurasian steppes. In some regions, these societies were the first to domesticate and ride horses. Over the next 2000 years, key innovations introduced by steppe nomads such as chariots, domesticated horses, and advanced bronze metallurgy spread across the mountains and deserts of Inner Asia and influenced the political and economic character of [ancient civilizations](#) from China to Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Indus Valley.

Although the mobile societies that fueled these networks came to share certain ideological and economic institutions, in many cases their political organization remained autonomous and idiosyncratic. Still, these regional economic and [social ties](#) forged between neighboring mobile communities helped new ideologies and institutions propagate over vast territories, millennia before the fabled "[Silk Road](#)."

More information: Michael D. Frachetti, "Multiregional Emergence of Mobile Pastoralism and Nonuniform Institutional Complexity across Eurasia." *Current Anthropology* 53:1 (February 2012).

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