

Evgeny Vdovchenkov*, Dalia Pokutta**

Some remarks on new directions in social archaeology of early nomads

The article discusses the interpretational issues of the so-called actor-network theory (ANT) in relation to the archeology of nomadic societies. Based on selected examples, in particular the analysis of clan symbols, the so-called tamga and military organization units (so-called troops), the authors present potential new interpretations of known cultural phenomena in the archeology of the Great Steppe.

KEY WORDS: archaeology of the Great Steppe, actor-network theory, Sarmatians, tamga, Broken Glass Theory

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In anthropology, new concepts of materiality and the *actor-network* theories have recently gained popularity (Latour 1993; Henare et al. 2007; Rollason 2008). One of the best examples is work by Bruno Latour in which he discusses a new vision of reality, combined with alternative views on theory of knowledge (Latour 1993, 2005). According to the *actor-network* theory proposed by him, the world is presented not as a collection of subjects and objects, but as inhabited by *quasi-objects* interacting within networks. Networks create and redefine *an object as an object*, helping the object to manifest its properties. Networks reveal the meaning of an object, and shapes it (Alberti et al. 2011). In the course of actor-network interactions, the formation of an object occurs as a part of only *things-in-phenomena* (Alberti and Marshall 2009), when there are no independent, individual *things* with predetermined properties or identities. The *actor-network* theory, by presenting an artifacts as an active participants in network interaction, allows us to look at the prehistoric society from a new point of view. We would like to focus on this experimental cognitive design and its potential applications in methodology of archaeological research.

The search for adequate methods and language in social archeology, continues with more or less success, and researchers are constantly trying to apply new theoretical approaches. Considering things as actors, introducing them into the context of network relations, emphasizing hybridity in the content of both people and objects and *pluriversum* has the potential to redefine cultural phenomena observable in archaeology. Objects define cultural and social life and influence people. To some extent, this may indicate a return of *mythological consciousness* – things come to life, gain life, especially in context of nomadic shamanism (Alberti et al. 2011; Alberti and Bray

2009; Alberti and Marshall 2009). Alberti and Marshall (2009, 338): stress that *to embrace animism as a new analytical direction in archeology requires a rethinking of key theoretical and methodological approaches*.

One of the better examples can be find in nomadic *tamgas* – an abstract signs of tribal and clan relevance (Fig. 1; Vdovchenkov 2016). *Tamgas* can be seen as an evidence of collective actions and negotiations, witnessing the participation of different clans in these actions (Yatsenko 2010). *Tamga*, the sign of the clan, strengthened the sense of collective identity and institutionalized ownership was an important symbol for the ancient nomads. The meaning of this sign has to be seen in multidimensional aspect. The significance was determined by the presence in the network of relations between *objects*, humans and natural world – clans, leaders, the stone slab on which it was written, the *tamgas* of other clans, the alliance that it confirmed, certain traditional rituals like a feast held at the conclusion of the peace treaty, the paint with which the slab was painted, and the place where it was erected.

However, not only artefacts can act as active agents (actants) in communication of particular network, but also eco-facts, immobile elements of surrounding landscape. In Scytho-Sarmatian world the erection of barrows played a dual role, as places of commemoration an cult, as well as the immobile landmarks, marking territory. In this example we can clearly see that immobile elements of the landscape frequently were used to express certain cultural context, behavior and to create *the network*. In social archaeology of the Great Steppe, many institutions, or cultural traits, such as for example equestrianism, chiefdom – can be viewed as dynamic network. An example can be found in military organization of nomadic societies, the squad institution. It should be noted that a single

* Department of Archaeology and History of Ancient World, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; e-mail: vdovchenkov@yandex.ru

** Department of Archaeology and Museology Masaryk University, Czech Republic; Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies, University of Stockholm, Sweden; e-mail: 244762@mail.muni.cz; dalia.pokutta@arklab.su.se



Fig. 1. A. Plate with tamgas; photo from the archive of the museum; B. Plate with tamgas; Novocherkassk Museum of the History of the Don Cossacks. Photos by V.K. Guguev

Ryc. 1. A. Tamgi – nomadyczne symbole klanowe; B. Stela z tamgami – oba zabytki pochodzą z kolekcji Muzeum Historii Kozaków Dońskich w Nowoczerkasku, Rosja. Zdjęcie archiwalne V.K. Guguev

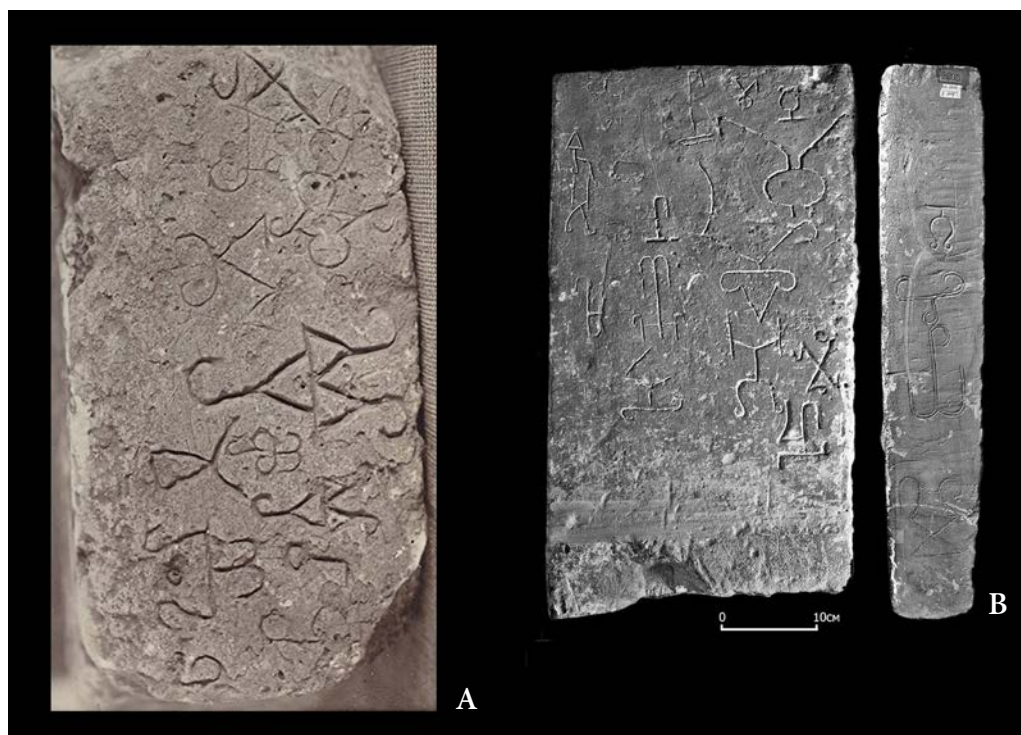


Fig. 2. A. Tamgas (KP 3842/II-206); B. Stelle with tamgas (KP 3842/II); Novocherkassk Museum of the History of the Don Cossacks. Photos by V.K. Guguev

Fig. 2. A. Tamgi (numer inwentaryzacyjny KP 3842/II-206); B. Stela z tamgami (KP 3842/II); Muzeum Historii Kozaków Dońskich w Nowoczerkasku, Rosja. Zdjęcie archiwalne V.K. Guguev

burial with a weapon does not in any way speak in favor of the existence of a squad, since a squad is a social phenomenon (and a separate burial with a weapon can be the burial of an aristocrat or simply a well-armed warrior, which is quite common for Sarmatians). A squad is an institution which existence is conditioned by a functioning *network*. For the existence of the squads as basic unities in military organization of nomads, several key components are necessary: strong political power (which is symbolized by this sword, obviously the royal insignia), the presence of common enemy, resources for existence (dependent population obliged to feed the warriors; craftsmen centered and obliged to arm the warriors), a weapons, trained soldiers, a source of replenishment of the squad, a certain system of values and beliefs, a communication system between the leader and the warriors (in which, for example, a feast played an important role), etc. The emergence of the cataphract cavalry (Fig. 2; Fig. 3) changed the relationship between nomads and the ancient world, which also affected the Sarmatian society and power relations.

Social networks not only exist but they have the potential to change the behavior of people (actants). The most interesting evidence for this is known as the *Broken Glass Theory* (Levine 2005). Mentioned concept is frequently used in criminology to explain why people behave differently in the so-called 'good and rich neighbourhood' and in poor districts of modern cities.

Quite literally, the theory assumes that the landscape "communicates" the quality of living conditions to people; such elements of the landscape like the broken windows transmits *the message* that a community displays a lack of informal social control. People living or passing by such area tend to be more aggressive when compared to highly-controlled, clean and orderly maintained *good neighborhoods*. Chaos and disorder of the network have a profound impact upon people.

The concept of cognitive order and chaos, and redefinition of the networks can be very useful in modern understanding of one of the most important social phenomena in nomadic world: the processes of sendenterization (Vdovchenkov 2018). The actor-network theoretical approach frequently uses the concept of a *sociotope* (Henare et al. 2007). The sociotopes can be defined as sets values, opinions, rituals or habits typical for the particular culture or group in specific place (consider e.x. cemetery). Different locations or landscapes can act as platforms for the deployment of completely identical actions in various human groups, because within the sociotope, habitual and stereotypical activities unfold (consider, for example rituals associated with cemeteries, warfare and battles, feasts and celebrations, trade and prehistoric economy, tribal diplomacy and negotiations, etc.). These functionally specific activities or sets and sequences of actions define not only the boundaries of places in social context, but also the role of people. Burial, wedding, or battle imply certain roles that the participants *have to* carry, with all ascribed statuses, obligations, and rights. The nomadic society passes through these social roles an element of deeper, internal order, predictability and stability.



Fig. 3. Sarmatian sheathed sword KP-23458 / 29-30, A2-420-421, SZ-49-50; End 1st century AD, Rostov region, Azov. Burial mound "Dachi". Kurgan 1, Azov Museum, Russia

Ryc. 3. Miecz sarmacki, koniec I wieku AD pochodzący z kurhanu 1 „Daczi” w Azowie, rejon Rostowa nad Donem; zabytek znajduje się w kolekcji Muzeum Archeologicznego w Azowie, nr inwentaryzacyjny KP-23458 / 29-30, A2-420-421, SZ-49-50

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Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia perspektywy interpretacyjne tzw. teorii aktora-sieci (ANT) w odniesieniu do archeologii społeczeństw nomadycznych. Na wybranych przykładach, w szczególności analizie symboli klanowych tzw. tamg oraz jednostek organi-

zacji militarnej (tzw. drużyn), autorzy przedstawiają potencjalne nowe interpretacje znanych fenomenów kulturowych w archeologii Wielkiego Stepu.