

# Archaeology and ethnic politics: the discovery of Arkaim

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The discovery in the southern Urals of a perfectly conserved city some 3,600 years old was not merely a significant archaeological event. As V. A. Shnirelman explains, it set off a chain reaction of far-fetched speculation and extreme ethnic nationalism which sought to exploit the find for purely political purposes. The author is a member of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

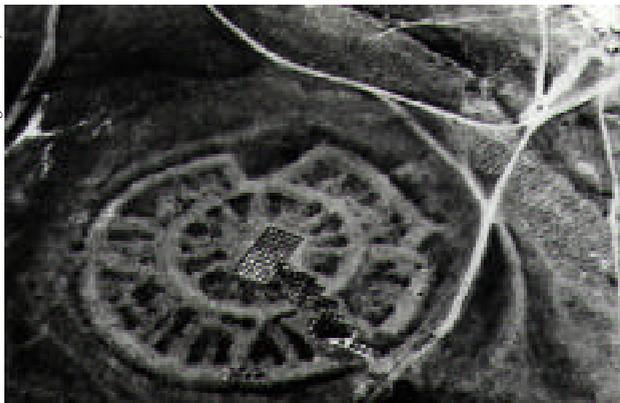
Nothing unusual was foreseen for 20 June 1987. During the summer of that year a team of archaeologists from Chelyabinsk State University headed by Gennady B. Zdanovich was to examine archaeological sites in the Bolshaya Karaganskaya river valley, where the construction of a reservoir had begun the previous autumn. The valley lies in the south of Chelyabinsk oblast (Southern Urals) at the confluence of the Bolshaya Karaganka and Utyaganka rivers. The archaeological sites already known in the locality had yielded little and had not aroused any great hopes. The summer digging season appeared sufficient to provide a general outline of cultural evolution in a valley that was to be submerged in the spring of 1988.

The inquisitiveness of two youths was, however, about to upset the plans of the archaeologists and the developers. On 20 June, Aleksandr Voronkov and Aleksandr Ezril, two schoolboys working for the expedition, informed the archaeologists about some curious embankments that they had found in the steppe. To the experienced eye it was apparent that some-

thing most unusual had been unearthed. That same evening Zdanovich informed the members of the expedition about an outstanding discovery, and the schoolboys, who had been the first to spot it, were rewarded with a tin of condensed milk.

What had the archaeologists seen in the steppe and what had so astonished them? During the 1970s and 1980s Soviet specialists had been engaged in bitter disputes concerning the whereabouts of the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans, the nature and development of their ancient culture, and the migratory paths of individual groups. The impetus for these disputes had been provided by two linguists, Vyacheslav V. Ivanov and Tomaz V. Gamkrelidze, who were of the opinion that the Indo-Europeans had come from Asia Minor. They were opposed by the eminent historian of the ancient East Igor M. Dyakonov, who located the early Indo-Europeans in the Balkans. Many Soviet archaeologists were convinced that the main area of settlement of the early Indo-Europeans had been the Eurasian steppes and wooded steppes where the cultures

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Aerial view of Arkaim.

that developed had been mainly those of the cattle-herding population that had given rise to the remarkable cultures of the Scythian world.

Linguistically, the Scythians were a Persian people, and the languages spoken by the Persian peoples are closely akin to Indo-European languages, the best known of which is Sanskrit, the language of Vedic literature, the scriptures of the Indo-Aryans. At one time the Persian and Indo-Aryan languages had constituted a linguistic whole. Archaeologists connect the Indo-Aryans with the steppe cultures of the second millennium B.C. What is in dispute is when and where the Indo-Aryans emerged as a distinct group and how they came to be in India. Some authors locate their original homeland in the southern Urals, while others seek it along the northern shores of the Black Sea.

This is why the discovery of Arkaim caused such excitement among archaeologists. Arkaim is a circular fortified settlement, roughly 150 metres in diameter, dating back to the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries B.C. It is surrounded by two concentric defensive ramparts of clay and adobe blocks on a log frame. Within the circle close to the ramparts are some sixty semi-dugout dwellings with hearths, cellars, wells and metallurgical furnaces. The dwellings open on to an inner circular street with wood-block paving. A drainage gutter with water-collecting pits was constructed along it and a rectangular 'square' graced the centre of the settlement. Entrance to the settlement was via four intricately constructed passages through which it would be difficult for enemies to gain access. All the evidence suggests that the settlement had been built to a common plan, which is indicative of a society with a developed social structure and local leaders with high authority. This impres-

sion is further strengthened by the fact that more than twenty circular and rectangular settlement sites dating from the eighteenth to sixteenth centuries B.C. have now been found in the southern Urals and northern Kazakhstan. The area, which archaeologists have dubbed 'the land of fortified towns', covers an area of 400 x 150 km.

The answer to the question of whether there was anything unusual about the discovery of Arkaim is both affirmative and negative. In the late 1960s and early 1970s archaeologists had begun to find remains in this area of fortifications and rich burial grounds dating from the second quarter of the second millennium B.C. The best-known achievement of the seventies was the excavation of the Sintashta burial ground, where a rich cache, including remains of a chariot and horse trappings, was discovered. It was already apparent at that time that the southern Urals were a most important region in the formation of a complex society that had acquired war chariots – a marvel of military technology at the time. Arkaim provided confirmation of that assumption and imparted a new perspective to it, by virtue of being the first well-preserved fortified settlement to be studied in some detail by a team on the spot. The fact that it was Arkaim that was investigated in this way was, of course, the result of a chance combination of circumstances. It is a fact that we now know of larger fortified settlements of the same type with far more impressive stone architecture.

#### The battle for Arkaim

Arkaim acquired special renown from the very dramatic struggle to rescue and preserve it. The reservoir was being built by what was at the time the all-powerful Ministry of Water Resources of the USSR. As initially conceived, the work was

scheduled for completion in 1989, but the builders decided to force the pace and complete the project a year ahead of schedule. The whole valley, along with the unique site, would therefore have been submerged in the spring of 1988. That had to be prevented by all possible means. The archaeologists did everything they could to mobilize opinion for the saving of Arkaim. Academicians, leading scholars and public figures spoke out in its defence.

Although the archaeologists were initially asking no more than that the building work be halted until 1990, there was soon talk of establishing a protected area or even an archaeological museum site in the Bolshaya Karaganskaya valley. In March 1989, following a lively discussion, to which specialists and representatives of public groups contributed, the Praesidium of the Urals Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR issued a decree establishing a special scientific laboratory to study the proto-urban civilization in Chelyabinsk oblast and requested the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation to establish a protected historical area.

The arguments put forward by the scholars were so convincing and public opinion was so vocal that members of the local and provincial (oblast) authorities also came to the defence of Arkaim. At the same time the Ministry of Water Resources rapidly lost authority as the democratic process spread throughout the country, the Soviet Union moved towards collapse at an alarming speed, and regionalism began to develop in the Russian Federation. It was riding upon that wave that the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation decided in April 1991 to halt the construction of the reservoir and to establish the 'Arkaim historical and geographical museum protected site'. In the following years work was put in hand for the creation of a



Photo by courtesy of the author

scientific campus, the provision of tourist facilities and the setting up of a Museum of Natural History and Man. It is proposed to restore the natural landscape of the valley, which has been greatly distorted by agriculture. At the same time, the parlous state of the Russian economy means that the museum site constantly faces financial problems. Its directors quite often have to accept charitable donations, especially from astrologers, which is bound to put the archaeologists in an equivocal position.

In the opinion of many specialists, Arkaim and similar sites could have been established by the earliest Indo-Iranians long before their separation and their migrations along the Eurasian steppe corridor and the southward movement into Persia and India. Some scholars draw parallels between circular fortified settlements of the type of Arkaim and the city of the legendary King Yima, reproducing the model of the universe described in the Avesta, the holy book of the ancient Persians.

All these hypotheses were actively employed by the scholars in their struggle to save Arkaim. In seeking to make their arguments more impressive, they tried to play on the imagination of officials by having recourse to some very risky assumptions. Arkaim was presented as one of the oldest settlements in the country, as

The archaeological experimental area with some reconstructed features such as an oven and walls.

the 'centre of a form of statehood of nomarchical type', as a temple-observatory comparable to Stonehenge, and was even referred to as the native land of the Persian prophet Zoroaster. Officials and tourists visiting Arkaim could see a placard with the inscription 'Zarathustra was born here'. Furthermore, Arkaim was included in the list of 'national and spiritual shrines'. In that context, it was sometimes asserted that Arkaim had not been built by Indo-Iranians, but by Indo-Aryans, who were allegedly closely related to the Slavs and could serve as a model for contemporary man-

kind of harmonious interrelationships between culture and the natural environment. The 'land of fortified towns' was referred to unequivocally on another occasion as 'the land of the ancient Aryans' and endowed with some special spirituality. The term 'Aryans' began to be used arbitrarily in a wider sense as a synonym for Indo-Persians.

#### Arkaim and the 'Russian idea'

As things turned out, the discovery of Arkaim and the intensive archaeological investigation of the 'land of fortified towns' coincided with the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union. The USSR, the successor to the Russian Empire, had always been looked upon as having been created by the efforts of Russians over the centuries, with the result that until fairly recently Russians felt themselves to be at home anywhere within it. The situation had begun to change in the ten to twenty years before the collapse of the USSR. The growth of local ethnic nationalism in the border areas made Russians feel for the first time as if they were foreigners, and many of them began to return to the central regions of Russia. Given that the formation of the vast Russian Empire had taken place over the centuries through wars of conquest, acquisition of territory and the rapid expansion of the Russians into regions inhabited by groups having different cultures and speaking other languages, it is not surprising that with the growth of ethnic nationalism the legitimacy of the presence of Russians in various parts of the country should raise questions for the indigenous non-Russian population and the Russians themselves.

Under these conditions Russian ethnic nationalists began a feverish search for historical justification for Russian domination over the entire territory of the former

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A stone figurine from the southern Urals.

Empire. The history of the recent and medieval periods, replete with campaigns of conquest, was not well suited to that purpose. The prehistoric past offered more tempting prospects for the propounding of arbitrary constructs as promising theories. Russian ethnic nationalists reopened on their own account the long-forgotten and rejected reasoning of the 'Slavic school of history' that had vainly sought to identify the Slavs with the ancient nomadic inhabitants of the steppe who spoke Persian languages (Scythians, Sakians and Sarmatians). Moreover, having armed themselves with modern archaeological data, they began to insist that the 'ancestors of the Slavs' had already conquered the European steppe zone back in the Bronze Age. They increasingly identified these ancestors with the 'Aryans', arbitrarily including in that category those groups of Indo-Europeans whom they found most acceptable as forebears. In this way the aggressive policy of the Russian Empire was represented by them in a different light as the return of the Russians to their hereditary lands.

In that context the discovery of Arkaim was most opportune. Zdanovich himself did not refrain from acknowledging this trend. 'We Slavs,' he wrote, 'consider ourselves to be new arrivals, but that is untrue. Indo-Europeans and Indo-Iranians had been living here [in the southern Urals] since the Stone Age and had been incorporated in the Kazakhs, Bashkirs and Slavs, such is the common thread linking us all.' Although archaeologists themselves seek the cultural roots of Arkaim partly in the middle Volga region and partly in southern Siberia, the Russian ultranationalists have opinions of their own on the matter. From 1991 onwards, when it was acutely felt that the territory of the Russian state was contracting abruptly and shifting northwards, the 'hyperboreal idea', according to which

the original homeland of the 'white people' was to be found in the Arctic region, came into vogue among them. Climatic cooling and the advance of the ice sheets had obliged those 'Aryans' to seek a new refuge.

In their southward advance they chose the southern Urals as the place where they would settle. It is there that the Russian ultranationalists locate the 'second homeland of the Aryans', from which they subsequently spread out over the vast expanses of Eurasia to the Carpathians in the west and China in the east. Those who put forward these views regard the southern Urals as the source of the Vedic faiths and consider that the area was practically the oldest example of statehood in the world, the capital of which was in holy Arkaim. Some of them refer to this statehood as 'Slavic'. These are breathtaking fantasies that entrance the spirit and, as is acknowledged by one of their disciples, Arkaim gives one 'the feeling of embodying all past millennia, destinies and decisions, pains and triumphs over difficulties. . . . There is a realization of being the heir to and the continuer of some great undertaking that turns out to have been alive within you for a long time. . . .'

The feelings that Arkaim arouses in Russian ultranationalists are once again reaching passionate heights. As one of them declares, 'Ancient Russia [Rus] existed, there was a written and spoken language, there were its spiritual values and Arkaim is the proof of all that.' Another individual interprets Arkaim as 'a symbol of Russian glory' and his comment to that effect is published with satisfaction by the Russian ultranationalist newspapers *Rusky Vostok* [The Russian East] (Irkutsk) and *Za russkoe delo* [For the Russian Cause] (St Petersburg). This idea is not without a touch of racism, and it is called upon to inculcate openly

xenophobic attitudes. It does, after all, invite Russians to remember their racial roots and 'Aryan origin', declares Arkaim to be 'the source of the proto-Slavic group of the Aryan people' and at the same time laments the dependence of the white race on some kind of alien culture stemming from 'the prophet Moses'. The plans for the inundation of Arkaim, that were successfully resisted with great difficulty by 'national patriotic forces', are instanced as an example of a blasphemous attitude to the heritage of the Aryan ancestors. The conclusion drawn is the declaration by Russian ultranationalists that 'until such time as national patriotic forces come to power, it will be impossible to repulse those who insult and plunder Russia'.

#### New fantasies, old assumptions

This idea suffers from megalomania and as time passes is accumulating new fantasies and the most strange assumptions. Those who hold it have no difficulty increasing the age of Arkaim by a millennium or more, making it 'older than the Egyptian pyramids' and asserting at the same time that iron was smelted there. Arkaim is also identified with Asgard, the secret homeland of the ancient Germanic god Odin. The sources of this myth are once again sought among the ancestors of the Slavs. Nor is any greater difficulty experienced in accusing 'Soviet freemasons' of having had barbaric plans for the inundation of Arkaim and in calling upon 'Aryans' to return to the 'Indo-European (Vedic) main line of development' in the name of the restoration of the 'Spiritual Superpower' (within the 1975 boundaries of the USSR).

A further 'theory' equally arbitrarily makes sites of the type of Arkaim and Sintashta a thousand years younger so as to declare the southern Urals to be the original

homeland of the prophet Zoroaster, where he produced the holy book, the Avesta, before taking the light of the new teaching far to the south. The legendary King Yima is credited with the building of Arkaim, 'the city of the Aryan hierarchy and racial purity', and the Sintashta burial ground is said to be the place where 'the great Old Russian priest-warrior' Zoroaster is buried.

The swastika is proclaimed as the symbol of Russian Aryanism. It grieves me to have to write that archaeologists provided the food that nourished this and many other 'Aryan ideas' of the Russian ultranationalists by their attempts to rehabilitate the swastika, in which they saw analogies both in traditional Russian rural culture and in the materials from Arkaim.

The Aryan theory was also to the liking of Russian astrologers, the best known of whom, Pavel and Tamara Globa, adherents of Zoroastrianism and 'Aryan astrology', had their own view on the importance of Arkaim. Pavel Globa stubbornly insisted that the ancient Persian priests had a special interest in the territory of the future Russia, that the prophet Zoroaster was born in the Volga-Urals region and that traces of the long-forgotten earliest civilization were to be sought in Russia.

Tamara Globa visited Arkaim in 1991 at the time of the summer solstice. While there she announced that the memory of it had been preserved for centuries by the Indian Magi and that its discovery had been foretold by the medieval astrologer Paracelsus. In later speeches she even let it be understood that the discovery of Arkaim was due to her. She had no doubt that it was the city temple built by the legendary King Yima, ruler of the Aryans in the 'Golden Age'. She proclaimed the Urals to be the centre of the world and the 'land of fortified towns' to be

the middle of the earth. She saw the fact that Arkaim, an 'island of the past', had seemingly surfaced out of nothingness as a pledge that 'the Urals will gather together the Aryans' and 'will become the place of their spiritual concentration' after millennia of 'the powers of darkness'. Russia, being in the constellation of Aquarius, had a great future and 'will rule the world'. Tamara Globastigmatizes as guilty of 'trembling when confronted with the future of Russia' all those who have a sceptical attitude towards the 'Aryan idea' and who see in it the birthmark of Nazism. Nor is that all. She tries to vindicate the swastika as well as the 'Aryans', describing it as 'the symbol of the connection of Rus with the Aryan race', adducing as proof the depictions of the swastika sometimes found on clay pots from Arkaim and proclaiming that the swastika was embodied in the very design of this fortified town.

There are organizations of mystics and practitioners of the occult arts in Chelyabinsk itself. They observe annual holidays and hold festivals and gatherings of their followers and worshippers who come from all over the country and from abroad. These activities usually take place in the spring and summer, and the programme often includes a visit to Arkaim.

Ever since archaeologists declared Arkaim to be a legacy of sun-worshipping Aryans, an atmosphere of secrecy has been built up around it and it has been recognized as a place where there is a build-up of mystic

forces. There has been an endless influx of tourists, prominent among whom have been followers of the teaching of Rereck,<sup>1</sup> astrologers, practitioners of the occult, neo-paganists, followers of Hare Krishna, fire worshippers and simply people eager to be cured of crippling diseases. The most popular festival is the Night of Ivan Kupala, 21/22 June, when there are heathen rituals here, accompanied by dancing and leaping over fires, mass orgies with bathing in the river, meditation and singing. The valley is visited by pregnant women, who believe that the waters of the Karaganka river are at least as beneficial as those of the Ganges. Tourists love to climb the Bald Mountain that rises above the valley and spend hours there 'tapping' energy from outer space.

Arkaim has flared up like a blinding meteor in the murky sky of post-Soviet reality, giving rise to flashes of doubt and of hope in the minds of the inhabitants of Russia. The mirages will disappear with the passage of time, but the riddle of the lost southern Uralian civilization will long continue to excite the imagination of researchers. I should like to believe that the Arkaim museum and protected area will have a long and fruitful life. ■

#### Note

1. A twentieth-century Russian artist and philosopher and well-known expert in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy – Ed.

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