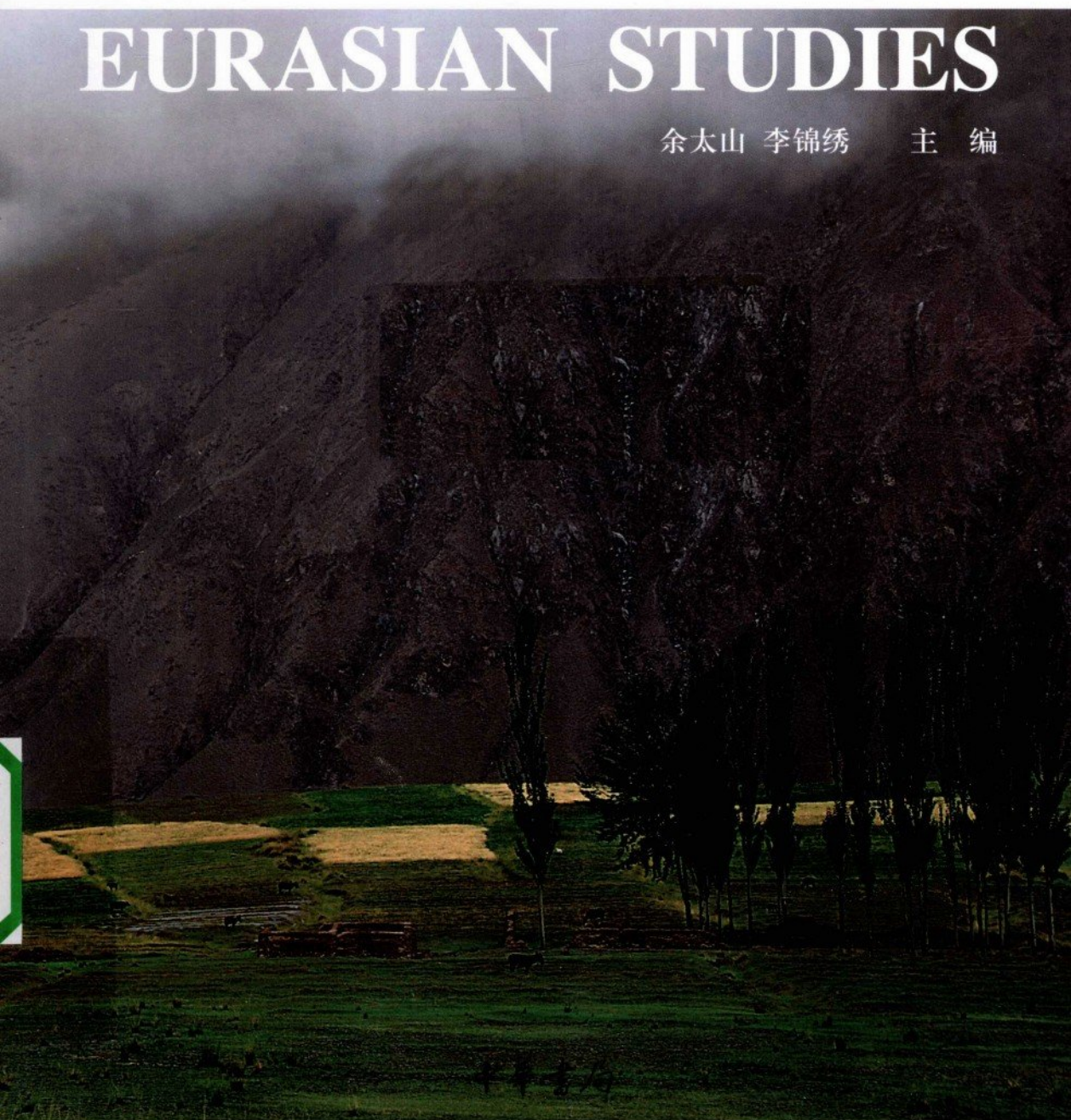


# 欧亚学刊

第九辑

EURASIAN STUDIES

余太山 李锦绣 主 编



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# THE SCYTHIAN IDENTITY

*by Bruno Genito*

## 0. Introduction

The construction of identities is an historical process of consciousness by which every individual, tribe, people, nation and race tries to set questions related to its past, to the political, economic and cultural stand had in the world, and to what extent the values inspired by the identity affects the materialization of the social, political and cultural objectives of a given society.

Constructing an identity is not a constant and unchangeable phenomenon but a process due to different kind of interactions, in the course of time determining ethnic, social, cultural, linguistic and other common cultural features and characteristics, and finally expressing what the collective identity for a given society is made of (Bavand 2002).

It is particularly important, although very complicated, to try to go into the details of the dynamics of the grandiose and ambiguous process of the formation of the ancient identity that realised along the long history of that large set of peoples, called Iranians. The area inhabited by those peoples was, in the historical times, in fact, enormous, from central Asia, to the boundaries of China, southern Russia, up to the delta of the Hindus river. Persians and Medians, Cimmerians, Sauromatians, Scythians and Sarmatians, Chorasians, Sogdians, Bactrians, Kušana, Saka, Ephtalites and the inhabitants of the oases of the Chinese Turkestan (present time Xinijang), constituted the main peoples of the Iranian stock who, in different times gave shape to specific significant state-political unities, realising their own civilisation.

## 1. The Iranians

The Iron Age constitutes, in general, a crucial historical moment for better investigating the

shifting from territorial, local “identities” to the aggressive “imperial” polities. Local élites emulation of the imperial social practices is often unproblematically interpreted as local strategies that use new hegemonic ideals of leadership and organization to consolidate power and identities. To be successfully, however, élites must still negotiate between these new strategies and local definitions of the leadership that remain meaningful to their constituents. Effective local leadership, then, requires a flexible and inclusive identity that is communicative within several spheres. Nowhere is this more obvious than Iron Age in Ancient Near East, where a loosely organized pastoral nomadic society underwent dramatic acceleration in social complexity following their incorporation within successive Mesopotamian (the Assyrians and Babylonians), and Persian empires. The extent to which these empires’ interest in controlling commercial routes played a crucial role in re-organizing local practices should not be under-estimated. While local identities continued to be expressed in terms of tribal affiliation, new élites communicative practices, expressed through naming, building, and gifting, arose that attempted to unite disparate tribal identities within a single collective ethnic (it was possibly the case also of the Iranians). When assembled, archaeological, historical, and epigraphic evidence demonstrates how this transformation in identity successfully integrated local identities and motivated subsequent collective acts.

Empires incorporate differing identities. This picture of multiple identities becomes even more complex when conquests are followed by migrations, and the ones occurred in the plateau were always connoted by migratory waves. Sociological and anthropological studies suggest that identity can act as an adaptation and / or survival strategy, functioning differently in cases of forced and voluntary migration. With voluntary migration, it is easier for people to construct a new ‘habitus’ to adapt to the place of destination; with forced migration, people tend to preserve the ‘habitus’ of the place of origin. Therefore, for migratory people, identity has at least two spatial components: the place of origin, and the place of destination. An archaeological study of identities the context of the Ancient Near East is possible through the analyses of the correlates of material culture. Whereas “high art” is related to power and reflects the dominant / imposed ideology, elements of everyday material culture, such as pottery etc., can be useful to get insights into the everyday practices of people, such as eating and cooking. Such practices are crucial in understanding how people define themselves, since they constitute an important part of the ‘habitus’, or deeply engraved ways of social behaviour. In other words, they contribute to form a way of preserving identity. The results will then be compared to the place of origin and to neighbouring sites, to see the ways in which deportees defined themselves as a group. It is expected that the social behaviour

of the deportees will be similar to the place of origin, but different from the settlements neighbouring the destination site.

Archaeological and historical studies continue to be framed by traditional models of linear dynastic rule. For the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a time fraught with political strife, this model belies the complexity of the socio-political circumstances and obscures strategies deployed by short-lived regimes to refashion “imperial” identity. Features of this period have further been erroneously polarized into imperial and nomadic terms, despite evidence that presents a more complicated *scenario* of cultural interactions. Although this two-fold characterization echoes loathsome sentiments expressed by contemporary figures, it masks an interplay of actors from disparate empires, whose contentious or civil contact enabled artistic traditions to traverse borders as envoys, their tribute, fugitives, and prisoners.

According to one widespread belief the groups of people who moved into the Black Sea area when the early tradition of Kurgans moved on, are generally considered to be the historical Cimmerians (Gallus-Horvath, 1939; Harmatta 1946/48; Sulimirski 1959; Diakonoff 1981; Ghirshman et De Sonnevile, 1983; Genito 1992). They may have been a later generation moving west from the Russian Steppes as were those who displaced them, the Scythians. The Scythians according to the sources pushed the Cimmerians in two directions, into Europe and into Asia Minor and Assyria.

The identification of the Andronovo Culture (Mallory 1997c)<sup>[1]</sup> first, widespread over most part of Central Asia, from South Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tadzhikistan, and the discovery of the find of Sintashta<sup>[2]</sup>, has led most of the scholars to interpret those remains as the cultural expression related to the origin of the nomadic pastoralism and, in a way, to the Indo-Europeans.

The information about the first waves of the Indo-Europeans into the Iranian Plateau is particularly scattered; the Kassites, the Gutii, the Lullubi, the Mitannians and the Mannaeans and other people could have spent a period of time in the Iranian Zagros territory and ruled over the local population and territory. The succeeding certain Iranian groups who arrived, possibly, starting from the 1st millennium BCE, the same as the Medes and Persians, were involved in some clashes with them<sup>[3]</sup>.

In an uncertain period, commonly considered possible between the end of the Bronze and the beginning of the Iron Age (14<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), numerous groups of peoples (among which one can imagine were Iranians!), started to settle down into the Iranian Plateau, a name which is derived from their original name (Young 1967; Ghirshman 1977). In this mostly arid geographic ar-

ea, the inhabitants could not do anything except adapting and trying to bring about relative changes in the natural situation, as the former population had evidently already done, in order to make it more suitable for living. The good conditions for agriculture in the plateau had realised when temperature and rainfall were higher than today, so that the primitive farming, employing only hand tools for cultivation, were the best. Since the Neolithic the sites in the plateau were located in regions where rain-fed agriculture was really possible. Settlements were few and often widely separated, usually, in areas with a good source of water, arable land, fuel, as well as of wild plant and animal foods, which people continued to gather and hunt (Genito and Kargar 2007, 46 ff. ).

As a result they succeeded in setting up different life strategies, amongst which the *qanat* industry (particular sub-terranean system of water channels), the dam building and barrage, and also in founding one of the most important civilizations in the Ancient Near East, characterized by a particular socio-political formation based on a strong control-system over the water supply and defined in the 50' as "*Oriental Despotism*" (Wittfogel, 1957). This probably occurred also in Iran, though the Iranian territory was mostly mountainous and not widely fertile, as the Mesopotamian, the central-Asiatic and Indian plains actually were<sup>(4)</sup>.

Located at the crossroads of migrations and invasions of many tribes since the beginning of the history, the Iranian plateau has been faced with two kind of constant extra-territorial challenges: on one side the contact with the desert-dwelling tribes from the north, northeast and east and sometimes from the southwest, and with the organized and civilized societies or the supporters usually from the west on the other. Hence the Iranian groups were obliged to organize its social and political structure in order to be able to preserve their cultural identity, in such a way to respond to these two different challenges.

Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, the period of the formative processes of the Achaemenid state, it is possible that the Iranian identity was exposed to the foreign forces; consequently some of the cultural elements got barren and unproductive and some others suffered from a kind of imposed stagnation.

The attribution of the material culture (chronologically and culturally) to the early Iranians, represents a very particular and difficult task, because the "archaeological correlates" are still not clearly identifiable; this conditioned and still conditions the research methods and strategies in reconstructing the ancient Iranian identity. Unlikely from the epigraphic, philological and linguistic, the archaeological ground should take in consideration a completely different set of documentation (territorial, material, architectonic and figurative), which cannot be put, always easily in relation

with the rest of the ethno-linguistic, though scattered evidence. The archaeological evidence is strictly merged in a territorial set which, to the light of the most up-to-date field methods, can give a different and not marginal contribution to the reconstruction of the ancient territorial identities. Up to now the very fragmentary, complex and scattered epigraphic evidence has been considered the only support and vehicle through which to single out any ethnic identity. To try to reconstruct a territorial identity is a new challenge for the archaeological research and is going to be revealed very important and useful, especially for such Iranian peoples as the Scythians, whose related direct written evidence is not existent.

## 2. The ethnogenetic process of the Iranians: preliminary considerations

It was assumed that the Herodotus' accounts related to the Iranian nomads were completely unreliable; archaeological excavations, however, have lent credence to many of the nomadic way of life and burial customs recorded by him.

The origins of the Scythians are uncertain, no explanation exists to account for their original location, nor details of how they possibly migrated to the Caucasus or Ukraine, the areas, where together with Black Sea, Asia Minor and southern central Asia, they look like to have been mostly located. Their original homeland has been considered a band of land from the Dnieper River where it enters the Black Sea, north to the headwaters of the Danube in central Europe, east to most of what was the southern Soviet Union and arcing north to Siberia. Their eastern boundary appeared to seemingly be the Enisej River that feeds into the Bajkal Lake<sup>[5]</sup>.

Following Herodotus, the majority of scholars has always given for sure that a people called Cimmerians, who had, presumably, inhabited (in the late Bronze Age, 12<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century BCE) the vast steppes of the present Ukraine, were conquered and replaced by the Scythians, migrating westward from Central Asia. Others scholars say that the land where the Scythians originated was, according to Herodotus, *Gerrhos*<sup>[6]</sup>; others yet suppose that the Scythians came from the Volga's watershed, reached the steppe of southern Russia, and drove the Cimmerian out of there. In the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Scythians held sway over the territory currently occupied by Ukraine (the plain extending to the west, from the Black and Azov Seas), through the outlet of the Danube. In this historical perspective they subjugated the peasants who lived on the borders of the steppe and river valleys, and subdued the trade colonies settled down on the northern banks of the Black Sea (Pontus Euxinus), such as Tiras and Teodosia.

A key fact in the culture of the Scythians was certainly the nomadic life, centered around horses, skill in guerilla warfare, and taming and using horses in combat (Harmatta 1941), in an environment comprehending a vast steppe territory, including different thousands of kilometers, from Hungary to Manchuria. It is not known how those horsemen of the steppes called themselves, who will then be grouped in the form of hostile gangs. Since these tribes did not write, the names given to them were generalizations made by foreign peoples (Greek and Chinese mainly), who, in different times and places, came across the Scythians and wrote about them and from which the names of various tribes, looking to be of Iranian origin, are known. It cannot be said with certainty that all of those variously referred to as *Scythians* or *Saka*, did actually speak Iranian languages, or that they were genetically related to the stock of Iranian's original speakers (Genito 2006).

These peoples consisted of different groups having the same life styles and funeral traditions. In other words, the term "Scythian" does not designate a unique people but numerous tribes sharing a common culture.

Herodotus described them more in detail using the word Scythians very loosely for almost any barbarians, saying that the 《true》 Scythians, were nomads. Herodotus names several different groups, or tribes among which there were the cattle breeders, the husbandmen (Her. IV. 18, 1 – 2; 19; 53, 4; 54) and the nomads (Her. I, 15; 73, 3; IV, 2, 2; 11, 1; 19; 55; VI, 40, 1; 84, 2; VII, 10, a, 2); other tribes include Alazones (Her. IV. 17), Arotres, Neurii (Her. IV. 17), Androphagi (Her. IV. 18) and Melanchlaeni (Her. IV. 20). A group identified as the Ploughmen (Her. IV. 17, 2; 52, 3) possibly settled in the watersheds of the Danube, Dnestr, and Dnepr, an agricultural region that had been developed since the Neolithic period. The Crimean Peninsula and the coastal area of the Black Sea came to be occupied by the Royal Scythians (Her. IV. 20, 1 – 2; 22, 3; 56; 57; 59, 1; 71, 2). To the north and east of the Royal Scythians arrived the *Nomad Scythians*, who probably represented the last wave of the Scythian migration to eastern Europe<sup>[7]</sup>.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, another Greek geographer Strabo gives an extensive description of the eastern Scythians, whom he located in northeastern Asia beyond Bactria and Sogdiana. He describes the names of the various tribes amongst the Scythians, probably making an amalgam with some of the tribes of eastern Central Asia<sup>[8]</sup>.

Also semitic sources present more than one passages related to groups of people that are possibly related to the Scythians; the people mentioned briefly in the Bible (*Genesis* X. 3; *I Chronicles* i. 6), are traced through Gomer to Noah's third son, Japheth; the same people (*Jeremiah* li. 27,

28) is also mentioned, in connection with the kingdoms of Ararat and Minni (around the Urmia lake) and the Urartians (around the lake of Van, Turkey) in an historical context which, possibly indicates conditions existent in the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and led one to suppose the existence of a political dependance of the all three peoples of Media.

It has often been ascribed the "Scythian" identity also to the group of people called *iš-ku-za-ai* / *aš-gu-za-ai*, of the Assyrian chronicles.

As one can easily see it is not easy to define the identity of the Scythians. Evidently for a long stretch of time lasting several centuries the Scythians dominated most of the Ukraine, traded with the Greeks and this trade accounts for Greek coins, pottery, jewellery and other artefacts found in the Scythian burials. The pressure from the East, exercised by the Sarmatians and later, from the north, by the Goths had eventually forced the bulk of the Scythians into other areas. It is known that a group of the Scythians had a kingdom established in Crimea with the capital in the vicinity of the present-day city of Simferopol' as late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

As it has been already said, the Scythians shared their lands with other peoples and are often confused with them, even by historians. This happened since the very beginning of their history, so that it is important to define who were the "real" Scythians distinguishing them from other groups. The Scythians expanded in a vast area since Assyrian times, often at other peoples' expense, like the Cimmerians, their early rivals in Anatolia that were displaced westwards.

It is a natural feature common to every people of the endless plains to ascribe a common origin or ethnicity, in the same way as language or any other characteristic. Concerning their origins, the Scythians' own legend described by Herodotus (I, IV) claim that they descend from three sons of Targitaos, to whom they ascribed a prodigious birth<sup>(9)</sup>.

Herodotus mentions that a king of the Scythians, Partatua was allied with Assyria, and recognized by Mannai. Partatua's son Madyes, at the request of Ashurbanipal of Assyria, defeated the king of the Medes, Phraortes (possibly Kshathrita), assuming control over the Medes. By the end of his reign, he had led the Scythians, and the Cimmerians, who seem to have been close relatives, on a pillaging spree, overrunning and plundering Assyria, Anatolia, Northern Syria, Phoenicia, Damascus and Palestine. They plundered the Temple of Venus in Ashkelon, and is mentioned also that they were as "*a destroyer of nations... [whose] chariots shall be as the whirlwind*" (Jeremias 4:7-13). The Scythians, pushed away by the Assyrians, occupied the northern shores of the Black Sea from the Tanais to the Danube until the 3rd century BCE, when the Sarmatians virtually obliterated them from the history<sup>(10)</sup>.

After however, the Scythians left the territory of the Medes—whether they did so voluntarily, or were expelled, is still debated. At any rate, following the Median sack of Assyria, they were compelled to switch sides and ally themselves with the Medes. They comprised part of the force that sacked Nineveh.

The Scythians are also reported in the Persian records as those who rendered the war idle and as distinguished in three tribes<sup>[11]</sup>. Another similar group of people named Massagetae were located in an area immediately east of the Amu-Darya river that flows into the Aral Lake from the mountains of Afghanistan (Her. I. 202; III, 36; IV. 11, 172; VII. 18). Their place in history was made when they repulsed an invasion by the Persians. They defeated and killed Cyrus I of Persia in 529 BCE. Tradition says that a Massagetae Queen, Tomyris, actually killed Cyrus and took home his head as a trophy (Her. I. 204-217;). The Scythians themselves were pushed in several directions by the Assyrians first and Massagetas later, so that in the period of the Persian Empire they were populating not only the historical *Scythia* (approximately modern Ukraine), but also Central Asia, Indus Valley and ancient Sakastana.

In the steppe areas the Scythians repulsed later also an invasion by the Persian Emperor Darius and made several incursions into the southern provinces of Asia. When Darius tried to engage a conventional battle with them they applied their withdrawal tactic, as they had nothing to lose—no cities, no treasures, no booty to take. They lived in the steppes and were the plunderers that swooped down on the cities, but the contrary was not possible as they had not any established settlements. There was no profit in conquering them, on the contrary, there was an expense in protecting the borders from them—only peoples with a similar life style were interested in fighting for the supremacy over the steppes. When the Scythians were attacked by Darius the Great of Persia, they were apparently reached by crossing the Danube. Herodotus relates that, being nomads, they were able to frustrate the designs of the Persian army by letting them march through the entire country without an engagement. If he is to be believed, Darius in this manner reached as far as the Volga river. When Herodotus wrote his Histories in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Greeks distinguished a “*Greater Scythia*” extending a 20-day ride from the Danube river in the west, across the steppes of today’s Ukraine to the lower Don basin, from “*Scythia Minor*”. The Don, then known as Tanaïs, has been a major trading route ever since. The Scythians apparently obtained their wealth from their control over the trade from the north to Greece, through the Greek Black Sea colonial ports. They also grew grain, and shipped wheat, flocks, and cheese to Greece. The Crimean Scythians created a kingdom extending from the lower Dnieper river to the Crimea. Their capital



city, Neapolis, existed on the outskirts of modern day Simferopol'. It was destroyed much later, in the 5th century CE, by the Goths.

Craftsmen from the colonies north of the Black Sea, contributed probably to make spectacular Scythian gold ornaments, applying a kind of realism to depict motifs of lions, antlered reindeer and griffons. The centerpoint of Hellenic-Scythian contact was focused on the Hellenistic cities and small kingdoms of the Cimmerian-Bosphorus and Crimea. Shortly after 300 BCE, the Celts seem to have displaced the Scythians from the Balkans, and in southern Russia, and they were gradually overwhelmed by the Sarmatians. Although the Scythians had allegedly disappeared in the 1st century BCE, eastern Romans continued to speak conventionally of "Scythians" to designate mounted Eurasian nomadic barbarians in general; in 448 CE the emissary Priscus is led to Attila's encampment in Pannonia by two mounted "Scythians"—distinguished from the Goths and Huns who also followed Attila.

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## Notes:

- [1] The Andronovo culture is a group of Bronze Age cultures of southern Siberia and Central Asia (c. 2300 - 1000 BCE). The name derives from the village of Andronovo, where in 1914, several graves were discovered, with skeletons in crouched positions, buried with richly decorated pottery. At least four sub-cultures have been since distinguished, during which the culture expands towards the south and the east; 1. Sintashta-Petrovka-Arkaim (Southern Urals, northern Kazakhstan, 2200-1600 BCE), with: a. Sintashta fortification of ca. 1800 BCE at the Ćeljabin'sk oblast'; and b. the nearby Arkaim settlement dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century; 2. Alakul' (2100-1400 BCE) between Oxus and Jaxartes, Kyzil Kum desert; 3. Alekseevka (1300-1100 BCE "final Bronze") in eastern Kazakhstan, contacts with Namazga VI in Turkmenia; 4. Fedorovo (1500-1300 BCE) in southern Siberia (earliest evidence of cremation and fire cult with Bishkent-Wakhsh (1000-800 BCE).
- [2] Sintashta is a site on the upper Ural River. It is famed for its grave-offerings, particularly chariot burials. These inhumations were in kurgans and included all or parts of animals (horse and dog) deposited into the barrow. Sintashta is often pointed to as the early proto-Indo-Iranian site, though are similar sites in the Volga-Ural steppe. In southern Siberia and Kazakhstan, the *Andronovo* was succeeded by the Karasuk culture (1500-800 BCE), which is sometimes asserted to be non-Indo-European, and, at other times, to