

## ДИСКУССИЯ



Серия «Геоархеология. Этнология. Антропология»

2013. № 1 (2). С. 196–202

Онлайн-доступ к журналу:

<http://isu.ru/izvestia>

ИЗВЕСТИЯ

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государственного  
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УДК 902(571.53)«627»

### **Reconsidering Methodological Holism in the Middle Holocene Cis-Baikal's «Post-Hiatus» Period**

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**Abstract.** Recent archaeological studies of the Cis-Baikal describe the region's Middle Holocene prehistory in terms of two broad culture-historic units – the «pre-hiatus» and «post-hiatus» periods (approx. 8000–7000 cal BP and 6000–4000 cal BP, respectively). In this paper I discuss the implications of the «post-hiatus» construct for the study of Southern Siberia's prehistoric forager inhabitants, and suggest that while this monolithic grouping enabled archaeologists to make highly productive comparisons between chronologically discontinuous populations, it has also fostered the development of an ahistoric and anti-individualistic approach to cultural change in Western scholarship on the region.

**Key words:** Cis-Baikal, post-hiatus, holistic approaches, culture change.

#### **Holism and Agency in the Analysis of Cis-Baikal Funerary Data**

Burials have long served as an important type of data for reconstructions of prehistoric social organization both in the Cis-Baikal research tradition and more broadly. In the last two decades, data from Middle Holocene Cis-Baikal burial contexts as well as new methods have enabled researchers to make a number of breakthroughs. These include increasingly refined chronologies [Weber, McKenzie, Beukens 2010], novel information about prehistoric subsistence patterns [Losey, Nomokonova, Goriunova 2008; Weber, Link, Katzenberg 2002; Weber and Link 1998], analyses of biological affinities between populations that inhabited the Cis-Baikal during the Middle Holocene on the basis of mitochondrial DNA [Matrilin-eal affinities ..., 2005; Uncovering the Genetic Landscape ..., 2010; Genetic diversity in native Siberians ..., 2010], and detailed studies of human mobility patterns using isotopic data from human tooth enamel [Hunter-gatherer mobility strategies ..., 2008, Haverkort, Bazaliiskii, Savel'ev, 2010; Weber, Goriunova, 2012].

In addition, researchers have also undertaken limited studies of prehistoric demographic changes in the Cis-Baikal by comparing demographic profiles of different populations that inhabited the region over time [Weber, Bettinger, 2010]. Here I suggest that these recent studies have tended to treat human burials as overly credible sources of demographic information (see below). Further, though closely related, I observe that current western archaeological research in the Cis-Baikal region has used burial data primarily in order to understand what Weber, Link and

Katzenberg [2002, p. 288] describe as «hunter-gatherer adaptations as a whole». This holistic project takes the *a priori* view that the region's Middle Holocene inhabitants are best seen as part of a closed system of environmental inputs and *group-level* cultural outputs. This approach also privileges local ecology above all other potential factors as the immediate cause for change in the cultural configurations that existed among the region's inhabitants, giving actual social actors little or no role in sociopolitical processes [Brumfiel, 1992].

The fundamental opposition between «holistic social theories» – that consider whole *societies*, rather than the individuals who compose them, to be the indivisible social unit of interest – and «methodological individualism» – which foregrounds the role of *individual actors* in producing social change – has a long history in archaeology [Gillespie, 2001]. In the late 20-th century, many archaeologists began to respond to what they perceived as a widespread bias toward holistic approaches within the discipline, and moved away from this tendency to view cultures as adaptive responses to environmental obstacles [Arnold, 1996; Brumfiel, 1992; Earle, 1997; Hayden, 1994].

While recent works have thus attempted to resolve this disciplinary bias toward holism by turning to concepts such as agency [Agency in Archaeology, 1999] that depict social systems as fluid constructs negotiated by social actors who behave subjectively in response to their individual needs, the use of the agency concept still often obscures a *de facto* form of «top-down», holistic approach by alternately privileging either «class, faction, age group, and gender, or actual collectivities and institutions. In some perspectives, agency is a property limited *only* to dominant individuals or groups» [Gillespie, 2001, p. 79]. Similarly, Wesson [2008, p. 2] criticizes the overly simplistic «just-add-the-agents-and-stir approach. Such studies frequently substitute individuals for the ‘prime movers’ of previous archaeological inquiry. But social agents are not the free-ranging, omniscient, self-serving, methodological individuals some mistakenly assume them to be».

The goal of this paper is absolutely not to argue for the superiority of either «camp» on a hypothetical continuum of perspectives in social theory. Instead, I hope to point out that Cis-Baikal archaeological researchers have essentially never attempted to incorporate perspectives on the methodological individualism pole of this continuum into regional reconstructions, and to ask what such approaches, if anything, might contribute.

Cis-Baikal research today, especially among Western researchers, focuses largely on issues of group-level subsistence and group-level environmental adaptation, and primarily uses data from burial contexts to address these topics. Elsewhere, I have suggested that funerary data also can provide a useful lens to understand the strategies that living members of prehistoric communities undertook to achieve individual political goals [Shepard, 2012; Parker Pearson, 1999]. These individual goals may at times have been at odds with the interests of broader community segments, and funerals, like competitive feasts, may in fact have served particularly well as competitive political venues in small-scale societies [Hayden, 2009].

Thus, the placement of cemeteries [Goldstein, 1981], the frequency and placement of burials (see below), the inclusion of grave goods and individual bodies in

association with *other* bodies – all of these factors can speak to actors' political strategies, competition, and social tension, just as they might also reflect group-level subsistence strategies, *preexisting* social relations (thought to be unaffected by the act of burial ritual itself) [Binford, 1971; Weber, Bettinger, 2010], or «philosophical-religious» factors potentially unrelated to sociopolitical organization [Carr, 1995].

### **Holism and the Monolithic «Post-Hiatus» Period**

I also suggest that in the name of a 'holistic perspective' on hunter-gatherer adaptations, western archaeologists researching Cis-Baikal prehistory have tended to deemphasize the study of diachronic cultural change and instead have focused primarily on comparing chronologically discontinuous cultural adaptations among populations inhabiting broadly similar ecological regimes that existed during the Early Neolithic and the post-hiatus period, which began over a millennium later. This post-hiatus period includes not only the Late Neolithic, during which burial activity resumed after a long and enigmatic period of inactivity [Weber, McKenzie, Beukens, 2010], but also the Early Bronze Age.

Unfortunately, due in part to a near-total lack of Late Neolithic graves at sites excavated by the Baikal Archaeology Project over the last 15 years [Weber, Bettinger, 2010, p. 495], recent English-language research has tended to deprioritize the Cis-Baikal Late Neolithic as an object of analysis, thereby extending the chronological gap and cultural discontinuity between the two periods under study to nearly 2000 years. Most English-language studies that *do* include Late Neolithic data lump this period together with the subsequent Early Bronze Age, treating the two periods together as one monolithic «post-hiatus period» [Dental health indicators ..., 2007; Upper limb musculoskeletal ..., 2009; Weber, Link, Katzenberg, 2002; Radiocarbon dates ..., 2006]. In large part, this trend can be attributed to arguments in Weber [1995] and Weber, Link and Katzenberg [2002], that:

There were probably more similarities than differences between Serovo [Late Neolithic] and Glazkovo [subsequent Early Bronze Age] assemblages. The most conspicuous differences include copper alloy artifacts and new pottery styles in Glazkovo. We believe that these phenomena should be considered to be less significant aspects of *hunter-gatherer adaptations as a whole*, however useful they may be as culture-historical markers. [Weber, Link, Katzenberg, 2002, p. 288].

Given the length of the post-hiatus and the important events known to be occurring outside the Cis-Baikal during the two millennia that make up this period, lumping the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age into a single analytical unit seems likely to gloss major social shifts internal to the Cis-Baikal. These analytical units (pre- and post-hiatus) *do* however permit researchers interested in diachronic questions to ask *comparative* questions regarding convergent cultural adaptations under relatively similar environmental conditions. By emphasizing the homogeneous cultural characteristics of the groups that existed during the several-millennia-long post-hiatus period, the pre-/post-hiatus framework also serves to prevent an investigation of diachronic, internal social changes, because the Early Neolithic and post-hiatus analytical units represent discontinuous cultural groups.

Some western scholars have recently made calls to revisit cultural change *within* the post-hiatus period [McKenzie, 2010; Weber, 1995, p. 158; Weber, Link, Katzenberg, 2002, p. 290], and I have recently examined these differences, suggesting that the transition between the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age represents a case of significant sociopolitical reorganization [Shepard 2012]. If this is the case, then the numerous English-language studies that have exclusively used Early Bronze Age samples as proxies for the entire post-hiatus period must be treated with caution.

To summarize, I suggest that this explicit emphasis on understanding «hunter-gatherer adaptations as a whole» reflects a holistic bias to the study of Middle Holocene culture change in the Cis-Baikal, with researchers emphasizing group-level adaptations rather than individual agency and social tension as the major factors responsible for structuring prehistoric social organization. Further, this approach has in some cases involved superimposing Early Bronze Age patterns onto models of the Late Neolithic, thereby deemphasizing the possibility that major cultural differences existed during this period. In other contexts I have attempted to demonstrate the empirical problems with this position [Shepard 2012].

### **Conclusion: Agency Perspectives and Social Change in the Middle Holocene Cis-Baikal**

Major social changes appear to have taken place in the Cis-Baikal at the dawn of the Early Bronze Age, as enterprising actors began to re-imagine burial rituals as contexts for the creation of social inequality. In contrast, among Late Neolithic funerals, participants appear to have conducted burial rituals in order to demonstrate continuity within communities. However, the Early Bronze Age does not represent a «clean break» from preexisting Late Neolithic burial traditions. «The past» clearly maintained an important place in Early Bronze Age funeral ritual, as groups continued to use old cemetery sites and treated interments from prior periods with great care [Weber, Bettinger, 2010, p. 496]. Further, potent Late Neolithic-style symbols continue to appear in Early Bronze Age burials, albeit in smaller proportions [Komarova, Sher, 1992].

The political and strategic role of funerals in small-scale societies [Hayden, 2009] should be expected to affect not only their *form* (grave goods, labor input, placement), but also their *frequency* as well. For example, Early Bronze Age groups undertook burial rituals with far greater frequency than their Late Neolithic counterparts had. While some have approached this shift in burial frequency as evidence of changing population density [Weber, 1995; Weber, Bettinger 2010], it is also possible that the difference in the number of burials relates to the length of each period; the Late Neolithic may have been considerably shorter than the Early Bronze Age, as its start and end-dates feature flat sections on the radiocarbon calibration curve [Weber, McKenzie, Beukens, 2010, p. 36].

However, even if the Late Neolithic only lasted half as long as the Early Bronze Age, the difference in the number of burials from these periods is still disproportionate [Weber, Bettinger, 2010, p. 495, Tabl. 2, lists 192, 527 graves]. I have argued that it is important to avoid discounting other, less direct readings of

the Cis-Baikal burial record, especially given that current demographic models for the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are based *solely* on the number of interments in each of these two periods [Shepard, 2012, p. 377]. It seems plausible in light of other political economic shifts that took place at the time that the ways people used funerals might have changed during this period, and that these novel uses of funerals could have contributed to their changing frequency between these two periods.

In this sense, I suggest that the demographic information contained in burials constitutes a prime example of the unique insights that methodological individualism can bring to the ongoing archaeological research centered on the prehistoric Cis-Baikal. While holistic approaches that emphasize the study of *whole societies* as single analytical units treat data such as these as highly credible, direct representations of events *as they* were, individual-centered approaches that take factionalism and competition into account permit archaeological researchers to view burials not merely as reflections of unchanging social structures, but also as lasting traces of human actions that may have been designed for political purposes. Such approaches reveal that significant divergences in cultural practices unfolded in the Cis-Baikal over the course of the post-hiatus period, and demonstrate that indigenous groups may have used burial rituals in rather different ways during the enigmatic and understudied Late Neolithic and the subsequent Early Bronze Age.

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## **Переосмысление методологического холизма в исследованиях среднего голоцена Прибайкалья в «пост-хиатусный» период**

Бен А. Шепард

**Аннотация.** В результате недавних археологических исследований канадских, американских и российских ученых в Прибайкалье установлено, что в среднем голоцене на данной территории в соответствии с радиоуглеродными данными наблюдается две больших культурно-исторических группы, существовавших до «культурного перерыва» и после «культурного перерыва» (~ кал. 8000–7000 тыс. л. н. и 6000–4000 тыс. л. н.).

В настоящем исследовании речь идет о последствиях использования понятия «пост-хиатус» (период после культурного перерыва) в изучении доисторического населения юга Сибири. Высказано предположение, что эта монолитная группировка позволила археологам провести высокопродуктивное сравнение между хронологически неоднородными популяциями, выявить и провести анализ ряда интересных аспектов жизнедеятельности представителей древних общностей, населяющих данную область, и одновременно способствовала развитию антииндивидуалистического подхода к культурным изменениям в регионе в западной науке.

**Ключевые слова:** Прибайкалье, пост-хиатус, комплексные подходы, культурные изменения.

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