The Neolithic in Northern Asia: a Culture Area Approach*

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The success of the pioneer venture of Ehrich[1] in applying the culture area concept to the prehistory of the Mediterranean and the Middle East has prompted the present writer to attempt a somewhat comparable approach to the archaeological record in northern Asia, in the hope that such a classification may yield fresh insights here as well in the interpretation of archaeological data. However, within the time available it was possible to consider only a single period in the prehistory of so vast an area. The Neolithic was selected as the most convenient for the purpose, both because regionalism is perhaps most clearly marked at this time, and because the author happens better to control the data.

This is intended to be no more than a preliminary draft put foreward merely as a basis for discussion. As such, it is informal in presentation and not documented.[2] It is the author's hope that this attempt will stimulate others to work out a more definitive classification. It may at least serve as an antidote to

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[1] EHRICH, Robert W., "Culture Area and Culture History in the Mediterranean and Middle East." In *The Aegean and the Near East. Studies Presented to Hetty Goldman,* pp. 1-21. (J.J. Augustin, Locust Valley, N. Y., 1956).

[2] Much of the source material is surveyed in the author's "An Outline of the Prehistory of Siberia. Part I. The Pre-Metal Periods." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology,* Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 1-33. (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1958). More recent Soviet data have also been incorporated where available, accounting for divergences in the present classification. For the Chinese area, reliance has been placed on Max Loehr, "Zur Ur-und Vorgeschichte Chinas." *Saeculum,* Band 3, Heft 1 (München, 1952).

the still-prevalent stereotype of the monotonous uniformity of north Eurasian Neolithic culture with its unhampered flow from ocean to ocean.

We will dispense with any discussion of the culture area concept as such, or of methodology, since Ehrich has already dealt most adequately with these aspects of the approach.

"Neolithic" will here be defined as a pre-metal culture stage possessing pottery. No implication of the presence of food production is implied in the present context. Over most of our area this stage falls primarily into the 3rd and 2nd millenia B.C.; however, there is a marked time lag in the Pacific northeast, with survival, on the periphery, into the historic period.

The present tentative scheme is based entirely on cultural evidence, without consideration of geographical or ecological factors which may or may not be significant. It has also been drawn up without reference to the data from later periods or to that provided by ethnography. We will be the first to point out that we have as yet only a very dim picture for many areas, and must assume that fuller knowledge will call for many revisions. On the other hand, the broad outlines seem sufficiently valid and significant to justify an immediate attempt at trial classification.

Following conventional usage, we will arbitrarily set our western boundary at the Ural watershed and Ural River, although we must emphasize that these never constituted a cultural frontier. Thus, in the forest zone our western sphere would actually extend across the mountains into eastern Russia, while on the steppe the south Russian cultures penetrate eastward along the Ural River into Asian territory. Similarly, although the Pacific Ocean and Bering Strait form the natural eastern limits, we should point out that in the latter region our Pacific sphere spills over into Alaska and, possibly, the Northwest Coast of America as well.

In addition, there is a southern cultural frontier which sets off all northern Asia from the rest of the continent. This is formed, in the west, by the deserts of Russian Turkestan which separate the fishing cultures of the Aral Sea region from the

foothill agriculturists along the Kopet Dagh with their Near Eastern affinities. Farther east we are handicapped by lack of data, but we will provisionally draw our line along the Tien Shan to Kansu. From here to the Pacific it will coincide with the southern frontier of the North Chinese Neolithic cultures — the line separating our area from the alien world of Southeast Asia.

Within northern Asia as we have just defined it, two major cultural frontiers are discernible which divide the entire area into three culture spheres. One of these frontiers consists of the Yenisei River with the Altai Mountains and the ranges running southward along the Sino-Soviet boundary. The other, less simply defined but even more significant, follows the Pacific watershed of eastern Siberia south to the Amur basin, crosses the river a short distance below the modern city of Blagoveshchensk, and runs southwestward across Manchuria to northern Jehol, continuing down the mountains along the Mongol frontier until it reaches the Great Wall. Thence it follows the latter west to Sinkiang.

The resulting three spheres or primary culture areas we will label Western, East-Central and Pacific. Each is characterized by broad indigenous cultural traditions which are not shared to any important extent by the others. The frontiers are strikingly demarcated in the archaeological record. Major cultural movements took place within these spheres and only in minor instances between them. This is not intended to rule out occasional major stimuli from outside of our area altogether, such as possible Near Eastern influences on the Chinese Neolithic, or Southeast Asiatic movements to Korea and Japan.

Within these three spheres we can recognize secondary areas, each containing a distinctive major cultural hearth whose influence affected a sizable territory. The existence of definite regional varieties of these cultures provides a basis for still further division into tertiary culture areas (Ehrich's "Level C"). In some cases these tertiary areas may be regions of shifting affiliation, dominated at different times by one or another adjoining cultural hearth; or they may be composite areas characterized typically by a blending of neighboring traditions. Many

of these tertiary areas could still further be subdivided on a fourth level of detail, wherever more local cultural differences have been adequately defined. In most regions it is not possible to plot precise secondary and tertiary boundaries with our present knowledge, although we can recognize the areas in broader terms. The accompaning map is therefore highly schematic and often arbitrary; it is intended only as a general guide to our scheme.

Let us consider first the Pacific sphere, where we can recognize at least five secondary areas. One of these, North China (including southern Jehol and southwestern Manchuria) with its famous Black and Painted Pottery cultures, will be capable of considerable subdivision, which we gladly leave to more competent hands. The same comment applies to the second area, the main and southern islands of Japan, the domain of the Jomon cultures. Korea (with southeastern Manchuria) can perhaps be grouped with the Maritime Province of Siberia as a third area at this level, though our data are as yet inadequate; each of these would, however, constitute a definite tertiary unit, with the Maritime region extenting into northeastern Korea. The middle and lower Amur valley (with northeast Manchuria) probably merits separate status as the fourth secondary area. In neither of these latter two areas has the cultural terminology been established sufficiently to warrant citation here. It will be noted that Manchura is partitioned among four major areas, but the boundaries indicated for this are admittedly the most provisional of any proposed in this paper.

Very hesitantly and tentatively we lump the remainder of the Pacific sphere into a single secondary area whcih we may call North Pacific, containing Hokkaido, Sakhalin, the Kuriles, Kanchatka and the northeast coast of Siberia to Bering Strait. If we divide the latter coastal into two strip segments labelled simply for convenience Koryak and Eskimo (after their recent occupants), then each of these six North Pacific regions may possibly qualify as a tertiary area. Some of them, for example the Kuriles and perhaps Hokkaido, will doubtless prove to be composite or areas of varying affiliation. Others, such as the Eskimo area at the northern end, became active cultural hearths. All are character-

ized by varying degrees of cultural lag; some never passed beyond the Neolithic stage. We may hope that their interrelationships may be more precisely defined in the near future as a result of work now in progress. It is not feasible to enumerate the cultures represented here in the present state of the literature, except for the Eskimo area where the classic Bering Sea culture sequence has been identified.

The East-Central sphere falls readily into two major divisions. One comprises nearly all of Mongolia (with northwestern Manchuria), the Lake Baikal region, the Angara valley and the upper Amur drainage. In general, it seems primarily characterized by the well-stablished Baikal sequence of Isakovo, Serovo, Kitoi and Glazkovo cultural stages. This area can be further subdivided by placing Mongolia and Trans-Baikal (with their greater microlithic emphasis) in one tertiary group and the remainder (which seems to show considerable homogeneity) in the other. The location of this dividing line as shown on the map is highly provisional. The second major division consists mainly of the Lena basin below Vitim (roughly the area of the present Yakut ASSR) plus the arctic zone. It can also be divided on the tertiary level into a middle Lena culture area, with extensions northwestward to the Khatanga River and apparently to the mouth of the Yenisei; and a lower Lena area which extended eastward to include the Kolyma valley and the interior of the Chukchi Peninsula. The cultures represented are referred to as the middle and lower Lena Neolithic, respectively.

Three archaeologically unknown regions in the East-Central sphere are best left aside for the present, and are designated on the map by question marks. These comprise the Taimyr Peninsula, the valley of the Lower Tunguska, and Dzhungaria with the Mongolian Altai.

The Western sphere shows the least distinctive subdivisions, and is difficult to deal with satisfactorily in the present state of our knowledge. It is possible that it cannot validly be divided on a secondary level comparable to the preceding spheres, so great is the apparent overall unity. However, we know virtually nothing of the Altai and the central and eastern Kazakhstan steppes during the Neolithic; it is conceivable that they might

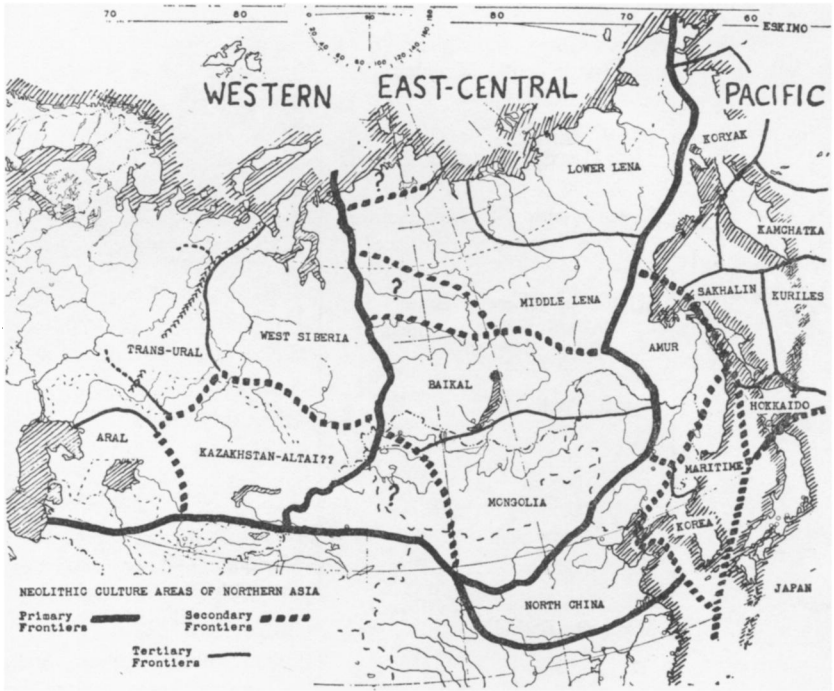
prove sufficiently distinctive to warrant setting them off at this level. The rest of the area, on the other hand, doubtless belongs together, although on a tertiary level of classification we will divide it into West Siberia (forest and forest-steppe), Trans-Ural (forest and forest-steppe) and the Aral Sea region of the Kel'teminar culture, with the reservation that the first two are very closely related and perhaps only arbitrarily distinguished. The Trans-Ural area, as we have mentioned, is only a part of a larger, culturally homogeneous Ural region embracing part of eastern Russia beyond our conventional boundary. It is characterized by the Shigir and Early Gorbunovo assemblages. The West Siberian Neolithic is known only from very scanty materials, and in general shows great similarity to the Urals.

In the course of ordering the archaeological data to construct this classification a number of interesting points emerged, of which space permits mention of only a few. The line of the Great Wall appears as a major cultural frontier even in prehistoric times, before the emergence of the factors with which it is associated, since as we saw, Mongolian culture is closely linked with the distant Baikal area and not with adjacent China. Also apparent is the scant importance at this time of the traditional environmental dichotomies (e.g. steppe vs. forest), since our cultural frontiers cut across these zones, and we find diverse environments embraced in quite homogeneous cultural units. It must not be overlooked, of course, that climatic conditions differed somewhat from the present, with less aridity than now prevails in the desert regions. A corollary to this is the equally scant importance in the Neolithic of the free east-west or west-east flow of peoples and cultural influences along the various environmental zones, especially the steppe, of which so much is made in later periods. Of interest is the direction of the flow of Chinese Neolithic influence: not primarily north, into adjoining Mongolia, but far northeast to the lower Amur valley. Chinese traits penetrate to Trans-Baikal, for instance, only in the Bronze Age. Manchuria, the meeting place of no less than four major areas, emerges as a unique cultural crossroads that should hold the key to many problems and warrants more scholarly attention than it has received up to the present. Another curious feature is that there was more diffusion from the lower Amur

over into the Lena basin than there was up the valley into the Baikal region. In fact, this Lena-Amur watershed seems to represent the weakest point in the frontier between the Pacific and East-Central spheres — yet geographically it is a difficult area to cross as compared, say, with the Mongolian steppes which form the frontier further south. In the far north, on the other hand, this frontier effectively prevented the later diffusion of metal from the interior to the coastal cultures and was a major factor in the late survival of the Neolithic in the latter area. It is also of interest that two of the three major spheres are present in the Chukchi Peninsula, the springboard to the New World, and are thus in a position to funnel their respective traditions into Alaska; the third sphere, on the other hand, is so far removed as to make it seem improbable that it played any role in this process.

On the basis of the picture presented by our classification, we may venture a few hypotheses. One is that there was minimum contact and influence across the primary cultural frontiers in Neolithic times, and hence that the flow of culture was generally from south to north and northeast along certain restricted channels — not directly west to east (or vice versa) following the environmental zones, except locally. This has important implications for New World problems. Another is that the importance of these frontiers dwindled only with the rise of nomadism (including reindeer domestication); that only then did the traditional unity and homogeneity of the geographical-environmental zones arise, with the accompaning sharp differentiation of culture between them.

In conclusion, we may suggest a few of the problems for future investigation which this essay has raised. What factors created and maintained these cultural frontiers? To what extent did geography and ecology enter in? Did climatic conditions differing from the present day play a significant role? Do the major frontiers extend back into the Palaeolithic? Which of them retain significance in later periods, and why? Where were the culture hearths and how did their influences spread? What are the implications as to source areas for New World culture? Is there any correlation between the primary frontiers and the racial history of northern Asia?



The points, hypotheses and questions we have suggested point up, we believe, the potential usefulness of a culture area approach to the prehistory of northern Asia. The present author would like to see this preliminary scheme refined by definitive studies and the concept extended to the remaining periods in the culture history of this key area.

PROPOSED CLASSIFICATION OF THE NEOLITHIC CULTURE AREAS OF NORTH ASIA

Primary	*Secondary*	*Tertiary*
East-Central	North China (with south Manchuria)	
	Japan (Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu)	
	Korea (with SE Manchouria) and Maritime Province?	Korea Maritime Province
	Middle and Lower Amur (With NE Manchuria)	
	North Pacific	Hokkaido Sakhalin Kuriles? Okhotsk Coast Kamchatka NE Coast (Eskimo)
Pacific	Mongolia-Baikal	Mongolia (Inner and Outer, with W. Manchuria) and Trans-Baikal Lake Baikal, Angara valley, upper Amur, upper Lena
	Lena Basin	Middle Lena (with Khatanga and Yenisei mouth) Lower Lena (with Kolyma and interior Chukotka)
Western	Aral-Ural-West Siberia area	West Siberia (forest and forest-steppe) Trans-Ural (forest and forest-steppe) Aral Sea region (Kel'teminar culture)
	Altai and Kazakhstan Steppe?	

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