

Inner Asian States and Empires: Theories and Synthesis

J. Daniel Rogers

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Abstract By 200 B.C. a series of expansive polities emerged in Inner Asia that would dominate the history of this region and, at times, a very large portion of Eurasia for the next 2,000 years. The pastoralist polities originating in the steppes have typically been described in world history as ephemeral or derivative of the earlier sedentary agricultural states of China. These polities, however, emerged from local traditions of mobility, multiresource pastoralism, and distributed forms of hierarchy and administrative control that represent important alternative pathways in the comparative study of early states and empires. The review of evidence from 15 polities illustrates long traditions of political and administrative organization that derive from the steppe, with Bronze Age origins well before 200 B.C. Pastoralist economies from the steppe innovated new forms of political organization and were as capable as those based on agricultural production of supporting the development of complex societies.

Keywords Empires · States · Inner Asia · Pastoralism

Introduction

The early states and empires of Inner Asia played a pivotal role in Eurasian history, with legacies still evident today. Yet, in spite of more than 100 years of scholarly contributions, the region remains a relatively unknown heartland (Di Cosmo 1994; Hanks 2010; Lattimore 1940; Mackinder 1904). As pivotal as the history of Inner Asia is in its own right, it also holds special significance for how we interpret complex societies on a global basis. Recognizing the broader relevance of Inner

J. D. Rogers (✉)
Department of Anthropology, NHB 112, National Museum of Natural History,
Smithsonian Institution, P.O. Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013-7012, USA
e-mail: rogersd@si.edu