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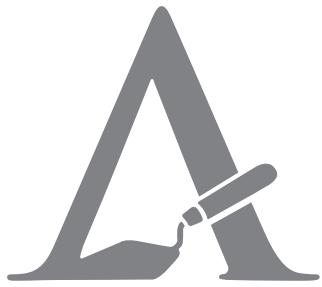
ARCHAEOLOGICA RESSOVIENSIA

VOLUME

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RZESZÓW 2025





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Uniwersytet Rzeszowski
Wydział Humanistyczny
Instytut Archeologii

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Study *The rise and transformation of Bronze Age pastoralists in the Caucasus*, published in *Nature* in October 2024, delivers a groundbreaking synthesis of genomic, archaeological, and environmental datasets, offering new insights into population history across six millennia. The study provides one of the most detailed reconstructions to date of population dynamics in the Caucasus over six millennia, while offering critical insights into cultural hybridity, mobility, and regional interaction zones in prehistoric Eurasia.

The paper is the product of two major European Research Council (ERC) projects conducted under the Horizon 2020 framework: *MICROSCOPE* (grant no. 803147, PI: Cosimo Posth, 2019–2024) and *PALeO RIDER* (grant no. 771234, PI: Johannes Krause, 2018–2024). Both projects have been instrumental in advancing ancient genomic research in Eurasia, particularly through large-scale sampling, methodological innovation, and interdisciplinary integration. It is worth noting that one of the co-authors of this article, Prof. Svend Hansen, is also leading an ERC-funded project related to the archaeology of the Caucasus (grant no. 834616, *ARCHCAUCASUS – Technological and social innovations in the Caucasus: between the*

Eurasian steppe and the earliest cities in the 4th and 3rd millennium BC). Therefore, we can expect new and potentially important data to emerge from this research in the near future.

The current paper addresses a major “lacuna” in our understanding of Eurasian prehistory: the role of the Caucasus not merely as a periphery of the steppe world but as an active mediator in the formation of early complex societies. The study situates its interpretation of long-term population structure in the Caucasus within a well-established framework of Mesolithic zones. In the southern Caucasus, the authors draw upon earlier genomic findings from key highland cave sites, particularly Kotias Klde (Imereti region, western Georgia) and Satsurblia Cave (also in Imereti, near the village of Ortvala). These sites have yielded Mesolithic individuals dated to approximately 13000–9500 BP, whose genetic signatures are typically associated with the so-called “Caucasus Hunter-Gatherer” (CHG) ancestry. This lineage forms the core of later southern Caucasian populations and made substantial contributions to the gene pools of Neolithic populations in both Iran and Anatolia, underpinning major westward and southward demographic processes.

By contrast, the northern Caucasus reflects a genetically distinct Mesolithic lineage, although securely dated and published individuals from this region remain comparatively scarce. This northern ancestry is understood to derive from steppe and piedmont forager groups, partially represented by early individuals recovered from the North Caucasus piedmont zone, including sites near Kumušanskaâ Cave (Stavropol Krai, southwestern Russia). Although not a primary focus of the study, Úžnyj Olenij Island (Karelia Republic, northwestern Russia) – more commonly associated with Eastern European hunter-gatherers – also features occasionally in comparative models of steppe-related genetic profiles. These northern lineages are particularly noteworthy for their apparent continuity into the Early Bronze Age, where they intersect with the formation of Âmnaâ [Yamnaya] and Steppe Majkop [Maykop] populations. Despite the relative geographical proximity between regions, the study underscores that southern and northern Mesolithic ancestries remained sharply distinct well into the 3rd millennium BCE, framing the Caucasus as a zone of both long-term genetic separation and eventual integration.

At the heart of the study lies the argument that pastoralist networks in the Caucasus were neither static nor monolithic, but instead experienced multiple phases of transformation driven by both internal dynamics and external interactions. This claim is substantiated by genome-wide data from 131 individuals across 38 archaeological sites, spanning a chronological range from the 6th to the 1st millennium BCE. The research highlights the long-term genetic continuity of two deeply diverged Mesolithic populations in the North and South Caucasus, and how this structure persisted well into the Bronze Age despite extensive contact and exchange. This finding challenges simplistic migration-replacement models and supports more nuanced frameworks of demographic entanglement and cultural co-evolution.

A key methodological strength of the study is its combination of dense temporal and spatial sampling with a nuanced integration of ancient DNA evidence, archaeological typologies, and site-level contextual analysis. Radiocarbon dating, principal component analysis (PCA), ADMIXTURE modeling, and f-statistics are deployed judiciously, ensuring clarity and reproducibility. The authors also avoid a common pitfall in archaeogenetics – the overinterpretation of genetic data as cultural identity. Instead, they emphasize the multidimensionality of identity, migration, and exchange. They interpret genomic changes as one component of a broader tapestry that includes local tra-

ditions, ecological adaptations, and social strategies. A standout aspect of the study is the identification of the Majkop culture as a key vector in the movement and transformation of “steppe ancestry”. By situating the Majkop within a dynamic flow of material culture, practices, and genes between Anatolia, the Iranian plateau, and the steppe, the authors bring to light a previously underestimated mediatory role of highland Caucasus societies in shaping the demographic and cultural landscape of the wider region.

The study's interpretive strength lies in its ability to explain complexity without collapsing it. Rather than framing the spread of pastoralism as a unidirectional process, the authors reconstruct a “braided stream” of interactions between settled agriculturalists, mountain herders, and mobile steppe populations. They argue convincingly that the Caucasus was not merely affected by external pressures but generated its own modes of cultural and biological adaptation. Such a view resonates strongly with current theoretical approaches in archaeology that emphasize complexity, interaction, decentralization, and polycentric societal development. Drawing on the concept of “contact zones” (Pratt 1991; Clifford 1997), the Caucasus is understood not as a marginal corridor between core civilizations, but as an active interface where distinct cultural, linguistic, and biological traditions were negotiated, hybridized, and redefined. Simultaneously, the study resonates with polycentric models of societal development (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Knappett 2011), which reject diffusionist hierarchies in favor of viewing early Bronze Age Eurasia as a mosaic of interacting centers, each contributing to processes of innovation and transformation. Finally, the authors' integration of diverse strands of evidence without reducing culture to biology echoes entanglement theory (Hodder 2012), which posits that social, technological, environmental, and biological domains are deeply interwoven in historically contingent relationships. Together, these theoretical frameworks reinforce the study's non-deterministic, network-oriented interpretation of prehistoric mobility and complexity in the Caucasus – a valuable reminder for scholars working at the intersection of bioarchaeology, archaeology, and material culture studies.

However, not even a *Nature* paper is without its limitations – and this study, despite its many strengths, is no exception. One area that deserves closer scrutiny is the asymmetry between northern and southern datasets: while the southern Caucasus is represented by well-contextualized and radiocarbon-dated individuals from sites such as Kotias Klde and Satsurblia,

the northern material is often less precisely dated and lacks strong integration with regional archaeological narratives. This imbalance may inadvertently influence interpretations of genetic continuity and interaction across the region. Equally, while the study excels in reconstructing genomic patterns and mobility, it offers little engagement with the symbolic and ideological dimensions of Bronze Age life – domains such as ritual, mortuary practice, and material expression of identity remain underexplored. In a similar vein, the paper does not fully address the potential of its dataset to explore gendered practices, kinship organization, or social stratification, despite the availability of genomic tools for such analysis. The near-absence of paleoenvironmental integration, including botanical and landscape data, also limits the ecological resolution of its pastoralist models. Finally, although the role of the Majkop culture is rightly foregrounded, the narrative tends at times toward a monolithic interpretation, with limited attention to internal variability, regional trajectories, or local adaptations. These are not fundamental flaws, but they do point to avenues where further synthesis – especially in collaboration with regional specialists – would enrich and refine an already outstanding contribution.

While the paper excels in its genomic interpretation, from the technical perspective there remain several areas where the integration of additional bioarchaeological proxies could have significantly deepened the conclusions. Stable isotope data ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$, $\delta^{15}\text{N}$, $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$), for instance, appear to be underutilized. Considering the study's strong emphasis on pastoralist societies, a more explicit analysis of dietary and mobility signatures would have enriched our understanding of subsistence strategies and seasonal movement patterns. Moreover, although the dataset is remarkably rich, the discussion of kinship and social organization is relatively brief. Employing fine-scale genomic approaches – such as runs of homozygosity (ROH) or identity-by-descent (IBD) analysis – could allow for more detailed reconstructions of household composition, lineage structures, and patterns of endogamy or exogamy. Finally, the environmental context, while

acknowledged, is not explored in great depth. Given the pronounced ecological diversity of the Caucasus region, integrating paleoclimatic and palaeoecological data, including climate modelling, would offer a more robust framework for interpreting episodes of migration, adaptation, and societal transformation. These are not fundamental shortcomings, but rather promising avenues for future research and synthesis. The article nevertheless sets a high benchmark for interdisciplinary integration and theoretical sophistication.

Despite these limitations, this study remains a landmark contribution to the archaeology and bioarchaeology of prehistoric Eurasia. It sets a new standard for how large-scale genomic data can be meaningfully contextualized within archaeological, environmental, and historical frameworks. Through its thoughtful theoretical grounding, openness to complexity, and commitment to multi-scalar analysis, the research offers a compelling model for interdisciplinary scholarship. While certain interpretive and methodological aspects would benefit from further development – particularly regarding ritual, kinship, ecology, and regional variability – the overall achievement is substantial. This is a work of both analytical precision and conceptual breadth, one that will undoubtedly shape the direction of future research on mobility, identity, and interaction in the prehistoric Caucasus and beyond.

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