

At home in death – A mortuary approach to Afanas’evo household organization in Southern Siberia and the Altai mountains

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Түйін сөздер: ерте қола дәуірі, Афанасьев, жерлеу орындары, кеңістіктік талдау, үй шаруашылықтары

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At home in death – A mortuary approach to Afanas’evo household organization in Southern Siberia and the Altai mountains

Despite a firm grasp of the material typology of the Afanas’evo culture, the underlying social dynamics shaping its material record and its place within the grander diachronic developments in Southern Siberia and the Altai mountains are only now starting to be explored in depth. Spatial analysis of Afanas’evo cemeteries mapping typological factors of surface structures and biological characteristics of the interred individuals yields spatially and typologically distinct clusters featuring recurring age-based distribution patterns. These clusters may reflect corporate groups adhering to a broader “Afanas’evo paradigm” while utilizing structural idiosyncrasies and spatial management to distinguish their deceased from other non-members. Following this argumentation, intra-cluster distributions of burials provide a diachronic perspective of age-based social dynamics and interactions within Afanas’evo households.

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Өлім кеңістігіндегі үйлер: Оңтүстік Сібір мен Алтайдағы жерлеу ескерткіштері материалдары бойынша афанасьев мәдениетінің үй шаруашылықтарының құрылымы

Афанасьевтік материалдық мәдениеттің типологиясы жақсы зерттелгеніне қарамастан, қазір ғана оның материалдық айғақтары негізінде әлеуметтік дамуы және Оңтүстік Сібір мен Алтайдың кең тарихи дамуындағы оның орны терең зерттеле бастады. Афанасьев қорымдарының кеңістіктік талдауы, жерлеу үсті құрылыстарының типологиялық ерекшеліктерін және жерленген адамдардың биологиялық ерекшеліктерін салыстыру арқылы, қайталанатын жастарының үлгілері бар кеңістіктік, әрі типологиялық тұрғыдан дараланған шоғырларды айқындайды. Бұл шоғырлар кеңірек «афанасьевтік мәдени парадигмасына» сүйенетін ұжымдық топтарды білдіруі мүмкін, алайда олар өзге топтардың өкілдерінен ажырату үшін құрылымдық ерекшеліктер мен кеңістіктік ұйымдастыруды пайдаланған. Осы контекстте шоғыр ішіндегі жерлеулердің таралуы афанасьевтік үй шаруашылықтарының ішіндегі жас ерекшелігіне байланысты әлеуметтік даму мен өзара байланыстарға уақыттық тұрғыдан қарауға мүмкіндік береді.

Сілтеме: Горелик А.В. 2025. Өлім кеңістігіндегі үйлер: Оңтүстік Сібір мен Алтайдағы жерлеу ескерткіштері материалдары бойынша афанасьев мәдениетінің үй шаруашылықтарының құрылымы. *Марғұлан оқулары–2025*. 38–48-бб. (Ағылшынша).

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Дома в смерти: структура домохозяйств афанасьевской культуры в Южной Сибири и на Алтае по данным погребальных памятников

Несмотря на то, что типология афанасьевской материальной культуры изучена достаточно хорошо, только сейчас начинается углубленное изучение социальной динамики на основе ее материальных свидетельств, и ее места в более широком диахроническом развитии Южной Сибири и Алтая. Пространственный анализ афанасьевских могильников, сопоставляющий типологические характеристики надмогильных сооружений и биологические особенности погребенных индивидуумов, выявляет пространственно и типологически обособленные кластеры с повторяющимися возрастными моделями распределения. Эти кластеры могут отражать корпоративные группы, придерживающиеся более широкой «афанасьевской культурной парадигмы», но использовавшие структурные особенности и пространственную организацию для различения своих умерших от представителей других групп. В этом контексте внутрикластерное распределение погребений предоставляет диахронную перспективу возрастных социальных динамик и взаимодействий внутри афанасьевских домохозяйств.

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Introduction

The beginning of the Early Bronze Age marks an important period in the chronology of Southern Siberia and the Altai mountains. Emerging through a migration from the Northern Pontic region [Грязнов 1999; Allentoft et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2021], the Afanas'ev culture introduced economic and cultural practices that would come to shape this region, both in the landscape and in its heritage. With now over a century of active interdisciplinary research by international scholars, the scientific community has a firm grasp of the material culture of the Early Bronze Age in Southern Siberia and the Altai mountains [Киселёв 1951; Степанова, Поляков 2010; Степанова 2012; Вадецкая и др. 2014; Степанова 2019]. Despite this clarity, the underlying dynamics that shaped the material record of this period often remain poorly addressed. Social organization at the lowest level, in particular, appears as an important aspect in the grander picture, reflecting daily functions, decisions, and interactions between people outside and within households. While Afanas'ev settlements can offer insights into daily activities, further understanding of the households that created them can be gained from burial monuments constituting large mortuary landscapes. This paper thus analyzes patterns in Afanas'ev cemeteries, mapping typological and biological features onto burial structures to identify practices of social organization reflected in the mortuary sphere.

Methodology

For the present study, site maps of five representative Afanas'ev cemeteries from the Minusinsk basin and Altai mountains have been selected for analysis. These are Afanas'eva Gora and Karasuk III for the Minusinsk basin [Грязнов 1999], as well as Sal'dyar 1 [Ларин 2005; Солодовников 2005], Perviy Mezhelek [Владимиров и др. 1999] and Nizhniy Tyumechin [Посредников, Цыб 1992] for the Altai mountains (Fig. 1).

Information on age, sex, number of co-interred individuals, and surface structure, contained in the original publications, was collated, codified, and projected onto the site maps. Color-coded circles mark burial pits. Where structures contain a single pit, a circle marks the entire structure. If no inhumation was found within an excavated structure, it was marked by a spiral. Color codes distinguish sex in adult

individuals, with blue marking males, red females, and black oblique burials with adults of unspecified sex or multiple co-interred adults of different sexes. Where subadult individuals are present, green marks infants, yellow children, and purple juveniles. In cases with adult-child co-interments, an outline reflecting the age/sex of the co-interred individual was added to the regular marking. Additionally, each individual was classified as either subadult (<20 yrs) marked by a 1, adult (20–40 yrs) marked by a 2, or elderly (>40 yrs) marked by a 3. Typological features of the surface structure were classified in regards to their outer fence and internal stone filling. Here, three classes were distinguished: Cromlech-like structures with no distinct outer fence (+), “complex wall” structures with fences made of stacked slabs (-), and structures featuring vertically standing slabs (/). Projecting the above categories onto site maps thus produces patterns filtered by surface structure typology, as well as age, and sex of the interred individuals.

Results

The spatial patterns yielded in this manner allow for two observations: Firstly, Afanas'eva structures form spatially and typologically distinct clusters. This is best observed in the case of Afanas'eva Gora, where the burial structures in question form four spatially, and, in the case of clusters 1 and 2 [cf. Вадецкая и др.

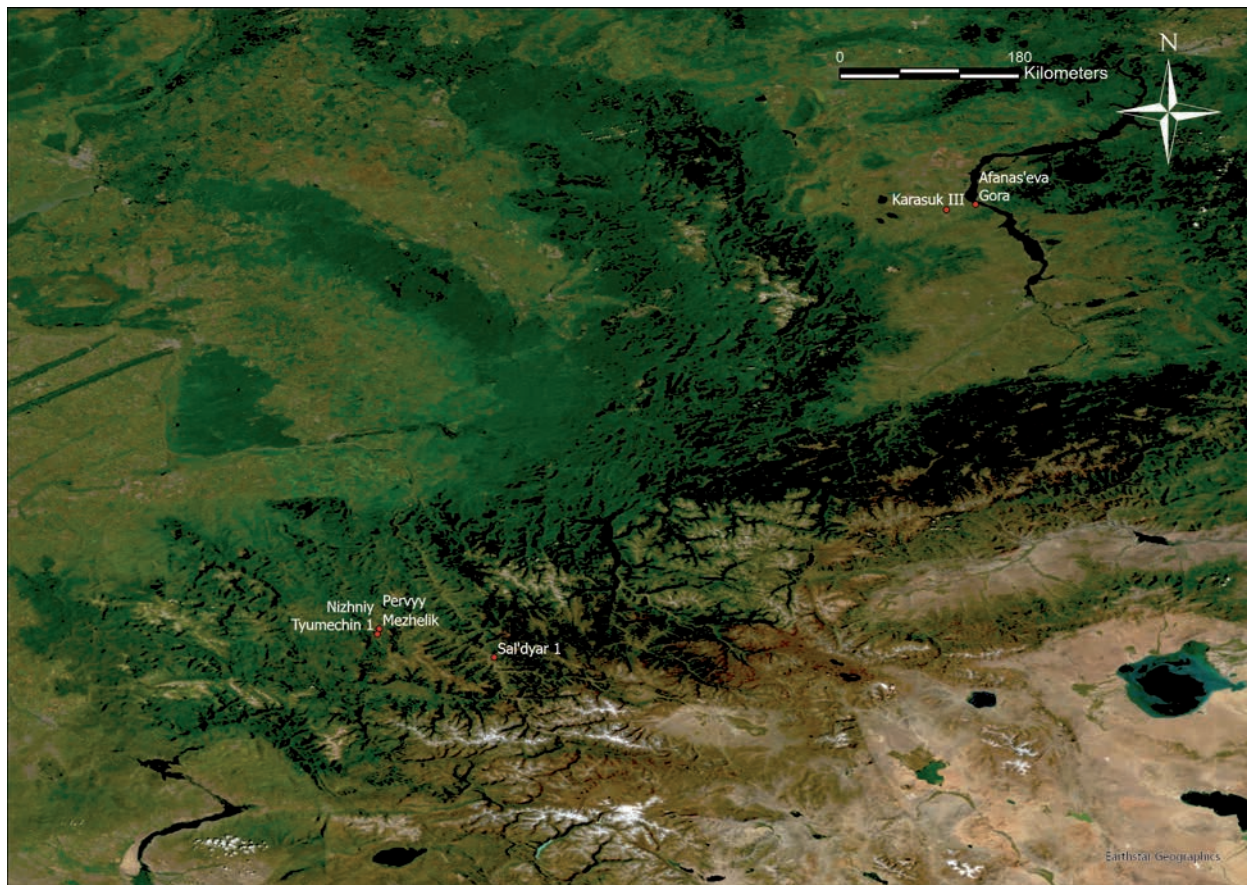


Fig. 1. A map of the location of the Afanasiev culture sites mentioned in this article.

Prepared by the author

1-сур. Мақалада айтылған афанасьев мәдениеті ескерткіштерінің орналасу картасы.

Дайындаған автор

Рис. 1. Карта расположения памятников афанасьевской культуры, упоминаемых в данной статье.

Подготовлена автором

2014: 122–129], stylistically distinct clusters (Fig. 2, 1b; 1c), along with outlier structures 41 and 29 (Fig. 2, 1e). Cluster 1 is dominated by structures with a complex-walled fence, whereas the adjacent clusters 2 and 3 feature cromlech-like structures (Fig. 2, 1c; 1f) [Грязнов 1999: 12–21]. A similar pattern occurs at Karasuk III, where most Afanas'ev structures feature a complex fence and form one cluster (Fig. 2, 2b). Here too, features with vertical-slab fences occur as outliers at a considerable distance (Fig. 2, 2c; 2d) or in a peripheral position to the main cluster (Fig. 2, 2b).

In contrast to the typological variation within cemeteries of the Minusinsk basin, Afanas'ev cemeteries of the Altai mountains mostly feature one type of surface structure (Fig. 3, 1; 2), typically accompanied by a tighter spatial clustering of burial structures. A notable standout here is Sal'dyar-1 (Fig. 3, 3), which features three types of surface structures – complex wall fences, vertical-slab fences, and vertical-slab fences with integrated boulders (/+) [Ларин 2005: 28]. The latter two types appear non-distinctive due to their general spatial proximity. However, structures with complex wall-type fences (40, 41) occur at a considerable distance from the main cluster.

Besides spatial and structural distinctions, burial clusters display recurring age-based interment patterns observed across Afanas'ev cemeteries in the Altai mountains and Minusinsk basin. Clusters typically contain a mix of subadult, adult, and elderly individuals of both sexes. Most notable is the spatial relation between subadult and adult/elderly inhumations. Subadult burials are most often in some form affiliated with adult or elderly inhumations. This pattern occurs in all cemeteries and structure types discussed here, with a notable standout being structures 3, 7, 12, 13, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 36 at Sal'dyar-1 (Fig. 3, 3). These contain exclusively subadult burials and form a spatially distinct standalone cluster lacking adult or elderly inhumations. The affiliation of subadult burials to adult or elderly burials can be observed across different interment practices. As such, subadult burials may have separate but affiliated surface structures or appear as separate peripheral pits affiliated with one central inhumation. This is best seen in Karasuk III structure 4, where multiple subadult burial pits are affiliated to one central burial pit containing an elderly female individual (Fig. 2, 2b). A similar but different phenomenon are subadult-elderly co-interments. This pattern occurs in all cemeteries discussed here (e.g. Fig. 2, 1c; 1e; 2c; 2d) and further across the entire geographic extent of the Afanas'ev culture. Subadult-elderly and subadult-adult co-interments are commonly interpreted as single-event depositions, rather than subsequent but separate burials [Вадецкая 2014: 306–308].

In addition, adult inhumations mostly appear in pits or structures spatially separate from elderly inhumations. While co-interments of two adult individuals, or two elderly individuals are common, shared adult-elderly burials occur only in larger multi-person inhumations in the Minusinsk basin (Fig. 2, 1e; 1f; 2d). These structures are usually interpreted as subsequent inhumations within one pit, rather than simultaneous co-interments [Вадецкая и др. 2014: 301–306]. Female individuals constitute a significantly large amount of the elderly demographic. This pattern may reflect certain stresses in the daily activities of Afanas'ev males, resulting in a reduced number of elderly male individuals in the mortuary record.

Discussion

Cemeteries serve not only as locales for the deposition of the dead but also as vital hubs of remembrance and interaction among the living [Wright 2012]. This is arguably the case for Afanas'ev cemeteries. While Russian publications predominantly attribute the spatial extent and stylistic variation of burial features to diachronic developments [cf. Вадецкая и др. 2014: 324], the possibility that intra-cemetery spatial patterns result from multiple smaller groups adhering to an overarching “Afanas'ev paradigm” appears more feasible in the face of the data presented here. Deceased individuals are typically buried following the views and beliefs of their fellows. This occurs with respect to overarching religious-

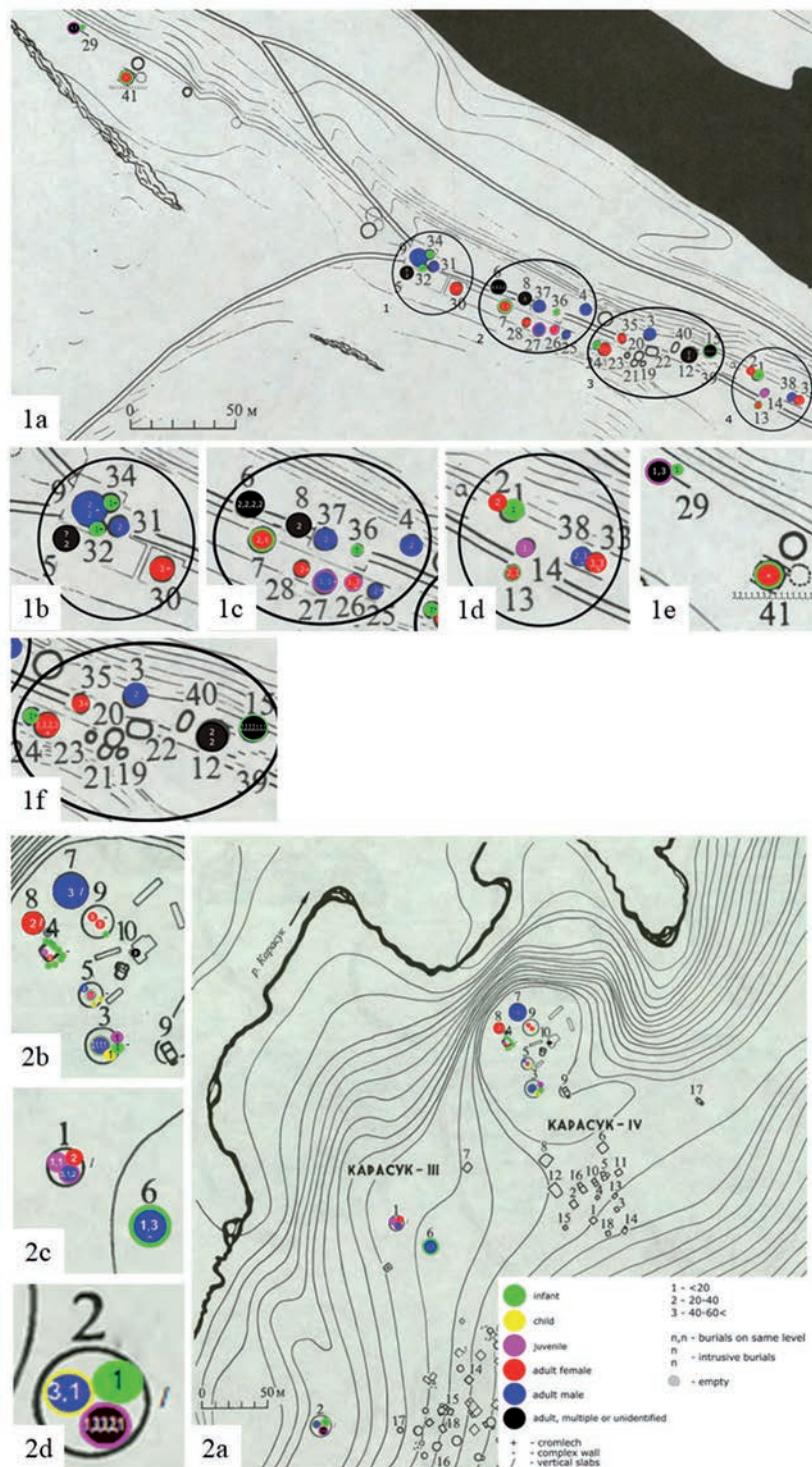
Fig. 2. Burial grounds of the Afanasiev culture in the Minusinsk basin:

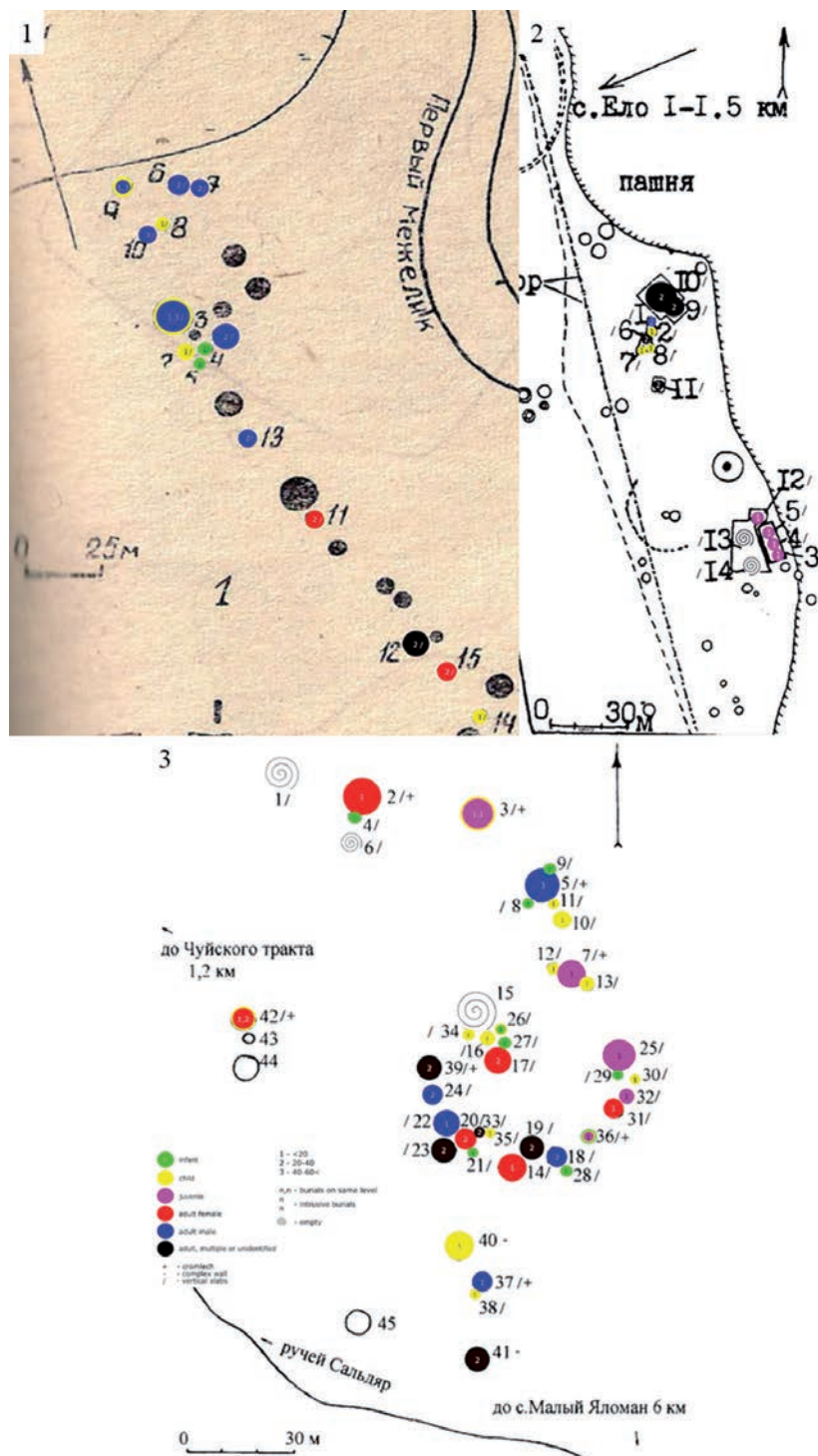
1a – Afanas'eva Gora overview – after – Gryaznov 1999: 89, Fig. 3; 1b – cluster 1; 1c – cluster 2; 1d – cluster 4; 1e – outlier structures; 1f – cluster 3; 2a – Karasuk III – after – Gryaznov 1999: 106, Fig. 20; 2b – main cluster; 2c – southern cluster; 2d – outlier structure. Prepared by the author

2-сур. Минусинск шұңқырындағы афанасьев мәдениетінің қорымдары:

1a – Афанасьева гора ([Грязнов 1999: 89, рис. 3] бойынша); 1b – 1-шоғыр; 1c – 2-шоғыр; 1d – 4-шоғыр; 1e – сыртқы құрылымдар; 1f – 3-шоғыр 3; 2a – Карасук III ([Грязнов 1999: 106, рис. 20] бойынша); 2b – негізгі шоғыр; 2c – оңтүстік шоғыр; 2d – ерекше құрылым. Дайындаған автор

Рис. 2. Могильники афанасьевской культуры в Минусинской котловине: 1a – Афанасьева гора (по: [Грязнов 1999: 89, рис. 3]); 1b – кластер 1; 1c – кластер 2; 1d – кластер 4; 1e – внешние структуры; 1f – кластер 3; 2a – Карасук III (по: [Грязнов 1999: 106, рис. 20]); 2b – главный кластер; 2c – южный кластер; 2d – необычная структура. Подготовлено автором





philosophical narratives and the individual's affiliation with corporate groups [Binford 1971; Goldstein 1976; Tainter 1978; Rothschild 1979; Carr 1995; Ensor 2013]. While diachronic developments in the typology of features and burial inventory must be accounted for, spatial clustering of burial structures with similar surface structure typology across all sites discussed here implies a wish to express affiliation to the larger Afanas'ëvo paradigm by utilizing the same landmarks to bury the dead as other Afanas'ëvo groups, while simultaneously distinguishing deceased members of corporate groups from other "non-members". Affiliation is marked by incorporating idiosyncrasies in the surface construction and through spatial separation from non-member burials, creating visually and spatially distinct spaces within larger cemeteries. The heterogeneous age and sex distributions observed within these spaces thus reflect diachronic developments, as well as synchronous dynamics both between their occupants, and in dialogue with the larger mortuary landscape. This intra-cluster heterogeneity and cluster size further points to the nature of Afanas'ëvo corporate groups as households comprised of 2–3 kin-groups. Kin-based households are common among both hunter-gatherers and pastoralist communities [Whitelaw 1983; Fisher & Strickland 1989; Fijn 2013; Wright 2016]. Afanas'ëvo household organization likely resembled the Mongolian *khot ail* in some aspects [cf. Fijn 2013; Wright 2016], while likely being much smaller due to a lack of domesticated rideable horses limiting herd size and ultimately the number of human household members these herds could support.

Age-based patterns likely reflect everyday household dynamics based on the daily range of activities carried out by different age groups. Adult and elderly individuals thus occupied separate spaces and fulfilled separate functions through different tasks, while subadults moved between adult and elderly spaces, assisting and participating in household activities. A diachronic reproduction of age-based dynamics between living household members in death would have required intimate knowledge about the burial location of individual members within the larger cemetery and cluster topography. Afanas'ëvo households thus likely habitually returned to designated places to bury their deceased "among their own".

Conclusion

Despite abundant typological investigations into the Afanas'ëvo material culture, an understanding of the dynamics that shaped the everyday life of the people responsible for its emergence remains fragmentary. The importance of households as core social and economic units has long been acknowledged by archaeologists [Wilk & Rathje 1982]. Investigations into pastoralist households highlight the dynamic negotiation of interdependencies between humans, animals, and landscapes as a key component in pastoralist households [Fijn 2013; Wright 2016; Houle 2017; 2024]. So far, however, mortuary features of pastoralists have been left out of this discussion, despite their abundance in the archaeological record.

This contribution is thus a small step toward grasping these dynamics on a level of social organization that reflects daily interactions between humans, addressing Afanas'ëvo household organization through a spatial analysis of funerary monuments. That said, many aspects are left unaddressed here. The relationship between burial inventory and the patterns investigated here could shed further light on household dynamics and possible inequality between different household groups. Comparing patterns observed in Afanas'ëvo cemeteries with those observed in preceding Neolithic and succeeding Early Bronze Age cultures could shed light on changing and persisting practices across time and space. Investigating Early Bronze Age Okunevo culture burials appears particularly worthwhile, considering the culture's close ties to Afanas'ëvo sites and its notion of reusing previously existing Afanas'ëvo burial structures. Another aspect worth emphasizing here is the value of old material and publications for new inquiries addressing issues previously left untackled. Future investigations should aim to incorporate and continue discussing material from these sites to yield insights reaching beyond culture-historical observations. What insights can yet be gained from those "at home in death"?

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