

Prehistoric 'Europeans' in Xinjiang? A Case for Multiple Interpretations

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Abstract: 104 words

Text: 3620 words

Figures: 7

25 April 2005

Abstract:

Three historical narratives dominate discussions of the prehistoric archaeology of western China, all of which are influenced by particular nationalistic agendas. Due to the general similarity between the Chinese and Western (re)constructions of the past, the interpretations of the ethnic minorities of this region (notably the Uighur) have been largely ignored. However, our examination of the available archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, and molecular data from the Bronze and Iron Age 'mummies' of this area provides evidence in support of the Uighurs' claim to the past of Xinjiang. These findings also highlight the ambiguities in the archaeological record, which allow for multiple interpretations of the past.

Keywords: Xinjiang, Indo-European, nationalism, Celticity, Uighur, identity

Introduction:

For many scholars involved in the archaeology of western China, assigning identities to the past has not been especially problematical. For example, the two most recent Western books on the subject of the Bronze and Iron Age ‘mummies’ of Xinjiang (Mallory & Mair 2000; Barber 1999) have both constructed a historical narrative in which the first inhabitants of the Tarim and Dzungarian Basins are perceived as ‘proto-Celtic,’ Indo-European speaking ‘Europeans’ who migrated thousands of miles across the Eurasian Steppe around four thousand years ago. Not surprisingly, this story has come into conflict with Chinese interpretations of the archaeology of Xinjiang Province, and with the history espoused by the oppressed minority groups of the region, including the Uighur. In a recent paper (Thornton & Schurr, in press), we have synthesized the archaeological, linguistic, anthropological, and molecular data that has been published on these ‘mummies’ in any effort to deconstruct the reductionist narrative outlined above. We have further suggested that the Uighurs’ nationalistic claim to the archaeological record of Xinjiang Province is not as specious as some Western and Chinese scholars believe. It is our contention that, by glossing over the readily apparent ambiguities in the archaeological record to come up with a single simplified historical narrative, Western scholars are unnecessarily contributing to the ethno-political conflicts in this troubled area.

Identity, Ethnicity, and Nationalism:

Jonathan Friedman once wrote that, “the discourse of history... is simultaneously a discourse of identity; it consists of attributing a meaningful past to a structured present” (Friedman 1992: 194). Indeed, the reconstruction of the past in the form of a primordial narrative is fundamental to the creation of an ethnic or a national identity (i.e., ‘nationality’), just as personal and group identities have a tremendous impact on how we perceive and interpret the past. As used here, the concept of identity has moved beyond the static ‘self’ and ‘others’ dichotomy to a more variable, discursive process known as ‘identification,’ in which identities are constantly being negotiated both consciously and unconsciously due to changing socio-

cultural contexts. Homi Bhabha (in Rutherford 1990: 211), one of the great pioneers of postcolonial theory, has defined 'identification' as, "a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification – the subject – is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness." This ambiguity of differentiation creates a cultural hybrid – a 'third space' identity – that is both primordial and constructed, essential (i.e., intrinsic) and instrumental (i.e., wielded; cf. "living tools of the self" in Holland *et al.* 1998: 28).

'Ethnicity' is one of the most basic forms of identity to be studied by anthropologists (others being race, gender, class, etc.). It is also a particular favorite among archaeologists, yet one of the most contentious. Although traditionally defined as the identity of a group of people who share a language, culture, and common ancestry, many post-structural theorists have attempted to move away from this essentialism by focusing more on how groups of people transformed and utilized their perceived ethnicities in response to certain external conditions – e.g., particular socio-economic stresses (Smith 1981). Such interpretations were important for breaking down the false dichotomy between primordialism and constructivism, but they ultimately failed to adequately explain the processes by which ethnic identities were created and transformed. This inadequacy has led many post-modern scholars (e.g., Eriksen 1993: 10-12) to seek more dialectical models for ethnic identity *a la* Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu's (1977) theories of structuration and practice, respectively. For example, Sian Jones (1997:126), one of the most influential authors on ethnicity in archaeology over the past few years, writes: "ethnicity is both a transient construct of repeated acts of interaction and communication and an aspect of social organization which becomes institutionalized to different degrees, and in different forms, in different societies".

The line between ethnicity and nationality is often blurred because of the naturally discursive relationship between these two forms of group identity (see Eriksen 1993). Ernest Gellner (1983) has claimed that the difference lies in the nation being tied to a sovereign state, i.e., when an ethnic group gains political independence, it becomes a nation. Benedict Anderson

(1991) posited that nations are created by a sense of community shared among individuals (who may never have met) due to a belief in a common identity and history (see also Holland *et al.* 1998: 247). In this way, nationality is 'imagined' in that it is a constructed identity based on invented uniformity, but it is by no means imaginary. Although lacking in tangible 'essence,' the effects of nationalism can be readily experienced and replicated.

Although various forms of ancient identity, most notably ethnicity, have long played a critical role in archaeological discussions (see, e.g., Childe 1926), it has only been within the past two decades that scholars have begun to question the interplay between modern identities and archaeology (e.g., Trigger 1984). For example, the debate over the presence of 'Celts' in European proto-history has often been tied to the need for a shared identity among the nations of the European Union (Dietler 1994; Kohl & Fawcett 1995: 17; Jones & Graves-Brown 1996: 15; see Carr & Stoddart 2002 for a review of 'Celticity' in archaeology). As Renfrew (1996) has so aptly noted, this serves both to construct a 'super'-nationality for the E.U., but also excludes certain nations and people whose historical narrative does not include 'Celticity' (e.g., the Magyars, the Finns, the Basques, etc.).

While many of the more aggressive post-processualists embraced the newly realized political power of archaeology and called on their fellow archaeologists to use the discipline as a means towards social change (in Trigger 1995: 263), many neo-Marxist archaeologists (see Kohl 1998; Trigger 1995) blamed the post-processualists for actively propagating nationalist agendas in archaeology through their emphasis on multivocality and inescapable subjectivity. As one archaeologist has suggested, "nationalist or racist agendas are only encouraged in an intellectual environment where the 'real' world is visualized as a web of competing ideologies" (Anthony 1995a: 85).

We would argue that it is exactly the *lack* of multiple voices, interpretations, and narratives about the past that lead to the egregious misuses of archaeological data for nationalism or other forms of identity-based chauvinism. Numerous examples of this chain of causality are found in the history of our discipline, including the attribution of the site of Great Zimbabwe to

Phoenician (i.e., ‘white’) immigrants (Hall 1995), the Stalinist narrative of the primordial and superior Slavs (Shnirelman 1995), or the more recent assigning of ‘ethnicities’ to the archaeological record in the Balkans to lay claim to disputed territories and justify ethnic purges (Kaiser 1995). These are extreme examples to be sure, but they are by no means unique or even unusual. As E.J. Hobsbawm has so eloquently stated, “historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market” (in Jones & Graves-Brown 1996: 1). By embracing the ambiguity of the archaeological record and the multiple interpretations that it allows, instead of searching for a one-sided, reductionist narrative, archaeologists can actually limit such abuses of the past by taking an impartial and even self-critiquing position on the archaeological record.

The ‘Mummies’ of Xinjiang: Three Narratives

From the West

The archaeology of western China (or eastern Central Asia, depending on where your loyalties lie) was catapulted into the media limelight in the mid-1990s with the unveiling of the Bronze and Iron Age ‘mummies’ (actually naturally-desiccated corpses) from various regional museums of Xinjiang Province (e.g., Mair 1995a).

[FIGURE 1: MUMMY]

Since then, the mummies have become the focus of much popular and academic attention due to their ‘Caucasoid,’ ‘Western,’ and ‘European’ physical appearance (i.e., fair hair, long nose, elongated skulls, high cranial vaults, etc.), the incredible preservation of their clothing and grave goods, and their surprising antiquity (ca. 2000-200 BCE) (see Barber 1999 or Mallory & Mair 2000 for photographs). While a full review of the archaeological literature on the Xinjiang Province is unnecessary in light of the excellent syntheses presented by Chen & Hiebert (1995),

Wang (2001), and in the collection of papers edited by Mair (1998), it is important to elucidate the reasoning behind such controversial claims.

The argument for a Western origin of the Xinjiang mummies derives from three lines of inquiry. First, there is the physical anthropology evidence.

[FIGURE 2: CRANIOMETRY]

Besides the ‘Caucasoid’ features reported by many observers¹ (e.g., Mair 1995b), a number of craniometric studies have been carried out by both Chinese and Western scholars, which supposedly demonstrate the more westerly physiognomy, of the early inhabitants of this region (e.g., Han 1998; Hemphill & Mallory in press). Perhaps more importantly, a recent reassessment by Brian Hemphill has shown greater cranial similarities from the Bronze Age to the Han Period within particular regions of Central Asia than between these areas, despite changing cultural contexts (Hemphill & Mallory in press). Whether such continuity in the craniometric record is indicative of shared ancestry or environmentally selected traits is uncertain, but the regionalization of physical traits is undoubtedly of some importance in discussions of identity. Of course, the use of skeletal measurements for deriving genetic ancestry has its methodological weaknesses and is politically controversial (see Cartmill 1999 for review). However, its prevalence in the literature has nevertheless had an important influence on archaeological interpretations.

Of perhaps greater importance than the physical data to the majority of researchers interested in this region is the linguistic evidence.

[FIGURE 3: LANGUAGE CHART]

¹ But see Day (2001: 353), who suggests that ‘Western’ features such as fair hair could be the result of taphonomic processes.

In the nineteenth century, European explorers returned from Xinjiang with Buddhist manuscripts dating to the 6th-8th centuries CE that had been written in languages and/or dialects of a previously unknown linguistic family: Tocharian (Mallory 1989: 56). The most surprising aspect of these newly-discovered languages, which historical linguists can only reconstruct back to around 500-400 BC (Lubotsky 1998: 380), is that they are an extinct branch of the Indo-European family with closer relations to western Indo-European languages, particularly Celtic and Italic, than to eastern languages such as Persian or Hindi (Hamp 1998; Ringe *et al.* 1998). Historically, the Tocharian languages were considered by many Chinese and Western scholars to have been spoken by nomadic tribesmen who left the Tarim Basin around the 2nd century BCE (Lin 1998; Renfrew 1987: 65). Most recent treatises on the Bronze and Iron Age mummies have generally portrayed them as proto-Tocharian speakers from the west (see Anthony 1995b; Barber 1999; Mair 1998).

The final type of evidence used to suggest a ‘European’ origin derives from the analyses of the mummies’ clothing carried out by Irene Good (1998) and Elizabeth Barber (1998, 1999). It was with great excitement that both researchers announced (in Mair 1995b) the discovery of twill-pattern woolen fabrics with plaid designs from late second millennium BCE tombs that were nearly identical to cloths found in later Hallstatt burials of Central Europe (ca. 720-480 BCE). The fact that such a distant parallel could be related to the lack of preserved cloths anywhere in between these areas was quickly overlooked, because such a long-distance link could finally explain the Tocharian-Celtic linguistic connection and the ‘European’ features of the mummies.

[FIGURE 4: ‘PLAID’ CLOTH]

Good and Barber’s interpretations, although well intentioned, were probably biased by a number of preconceived notions. For instance, the Hallstatt culture is often portrayed as descended from nomadic tribes from the Eurasian steppe and as the predecessor to the La Tène

culture (i.e., ‘Celtic’ art style) (see Cunliffe 1997), which is often confused with the modern Celtic languages. Furthermore, the unconscious folk-association between plaid twills and modern Celtic peoples’ use of tartans² undoubtedly shaped their interpretations. However, to claim a ‘proto-Celtic’ ethnicity, let alone a ‘European’ identity, for these mummies is extremely difficult to support with the available evidence. Although Good and Barber’s fine attention to these important textiles is laudable, one wonders if these scholars would be so accepting of a Chinese archaeologist claiming that the ‘Celts’ were actually Chinese due to the presence of silk in Hallstatt graves. This is a fact that Good (1995: 964-965) herself has published and seemingly ignored.

The nationalist agenda structuring the Western narrative to explain the mummies of Xinjiang Province are treacherous because they are covert and, in most cases, unconscious. Victor Mair, in his first edited volume on the subject, wrote, “I also hope to bring some of the corpses for a traveling exhibition to several museums in the United States and Europe. That way, modern men and women who are curious can see for themselves what *their ancestors* of the hundred-and-thirtieth generation back looked like” (authors’ stress; Mair 1995c: 305). Although his later publications have avoided making similar judgments about the evidence, such assertions, written in one of the seminal works on the ‘mummies,’ have inevitably changed the entire nature of the archaeological discourse from a study of ‘them’ to a study of ‘us’ – an innocent claiming of the past that, as mentioned above, has a long and violent history in this discipline. As the heavy-handed critique of Mair’s 1995 volume has demonstrated (see Zimmer 1998), we must not assume that all Western scholars believe the primordialist narrative espoused by Mair and others.

However, it is worth noting that no one has yet published a Western counter-narrative encompassing the archaeological, physical, and linguistic evidence. Without published alternatives, the general public and scholars in other disciplines are given no opportunity to

² This practice began only in the Middle Ages, but has become part of the ‘primordial’ Celtic identity of the present day.

understand the multiple facets of the archaeological record or participate in the academic debate – a fact that has historically led to many of the more egregious abuses of archaeology for nationalistic and ethnic purposes.

From the East

Interestingly, Chinese interpretations of the history of Xinjiang are not so different from the Western narrative posited above. There are, of course, some minor technical dissimilarities. However, the most significant divergence is that Chinese archaeologists treat the immigration of ‘European’ or ‘white’ people to Xinjiang as a transitional event in the Neolithic-Bronze Age period, which is dated based on eastern Chinese archaeological cultures, and not as a seminal event specific to western China, despite the lack of evidence for pre-Bronze Age Chinese occupation in the Tarim Basin (Wenkan 1995: 358).

[FIGURE 5: CHINA MAP]

In general, the Chinese interpretation of the archaeology of Xinjiang agrees with Western notions that Europeans existed in eastern China until the Han Empire arrived in the late first millennium BCE, at which time the ‘Tocharians’ began to disappear – either as an emigration in the 2nd century BCE or with the invasion of the Turkic-speaking tribes in the mid-first millennium CE.

Chinese archaeology has had a long, complex relationship with the ruling state ideology, most notably during the reign of Mao Zedong (1949-1979), whose explicit doctrine of “make the past serve the present” was efficiently enacted (see Tong 1995). The paradigm today, as von Falkenhausen (1995:210) has noted, is that, “historians and archaeologists concur that all the nationalities mentioned in the ancient texts were long ago fused into the Han nationality”. In other words, the role of Chinese archaeologists and historians is to define ancient ethnicities on the one hand while at the same time asserting that these peoples have all been subsumed by the Chinese nationality (following Rudelson 1997: 64). This distinction allows the Xinjiang

mummies to be of ‘European’ ethnicity (or even the ‘Caucasoid race’) in the modern Chinese narrative, because, until the Han Empire spread to the far western reaches of the Tarim Basin, these archaeological cultures were not part of the Chinese nationality. As C.M. Hann (1991: 236) has noted, such interpretations are based on a policy of integration, not assimilation.

The Uighur View

Although the Turkic-speaking Uighur people are themselves often described as ‘Western’ or ‘European’ looking (in relation to their Han Chinese neighbors), they are considered by most historians to have been a nomadic tribe (or group of tribes) that immigrated into the region from the Steppe in the early first millennium CE (see Gladney 1998: 817; Mallory & Mair 2000: 100-101). Such assertions by Western and Chinese scholars are intended to contradict the narrative espoused by the Uighurs, who claim³ that they are the descendents of a mummy that is “over 6000 years old” and which “proves” that they were in Xinjiang before the Han Chinese (in Gladney 1996: 458). This is obviously the rhetoric of the patriot⁴, but even Dolkun Kamberi, one of the few trained Uighur archaeologists of note, has stated that, “the Uyghurs and their forebears are an ancient group of people who have been living in Central Asia since the second millennium BCE” (1998: 806).

[FIGURE 6: UIGHUR PHOTOS]

While both Chinese and Western historians and archaeologists scoff at such blatant, nationalist primordialism (despite their own attempts to claim the past of this region), our summary of the archaeological, physical, linguistic, and genetic evidence indicates that the Uighur narrative is not as far-fetched as some would believe (Thornton & Schurr, in press). Although historical linguists are quick to point out the striking disjuncture between the use of

³ Following Turghun Almas’s chauvinistic book on Uighur history written in 1990.

⁴ It should be noted that using the incorrect date puts the origins of western Chinese civilization before that of eastern China.

Tocharian in the late first millennium BCE and the use of Turkish by the late first millennium CE, there are plenty of historically-attested examples of complete linguistic change without significant transformations in material culture or genetics, e.g., in Hungary (Semino *et al.* 2000), in Turkey (Comas *et al.* 1996), and in Siberia (Pakendorf *et al.* 2003). In all three cases, the new language appears to have been introduced by nomadic tribes from the Steppe who were quickly assimilated into sedentary society. Therefore, the Uighurs' linguistic replacement should not be viewed as a complete popular and/or cultural replacement, but, instead, an addition to or alteration of the pre-existing socio-cultural milieu. Molecular studies of modern Uighur populations, which demonstrate the presence of both eastern and western Eurasian genetic markers (see Thornton & Schurr for a review), lend support to this hypothesis.

[FIGURE 7: PCA CHARTS]

Of course, few scholars would state explicitly that the invading Uighur tribes completely obliterated the existing populations. What is in question, they might protest, is the Uighurs' claim to a primordial identity. As historians often note (e.g., Chvyr 1994: 63), the collective ethnonym of 'Uighur,' which had fallen out of use around the 10th-11th centuries CE, was only re-adopted in the 1920s and 30s in response to rising tensions between themselves and the Han and Hui (i.e., Han Muslim) populations of western China (Rudelson 1997: 6). Before that time, the Turkic-speaking peoples of Xinjiang were known by a variety of exo-ethnonyms (e.g., Turkestani, Chantu, etc.), and defined themselves simply as 'Muslims' (Chvyr 1994: 50). However, this is not to suggest that the people of western China did not have strong social identities. As Rudelson (1997) has convincingly demonstrated, 'ethnicity' in the historical past (as in the present) was based on three main factors: religion, class, and oasis region of origin. Which identity to proclaim was dependent upon the socio-linguistic context; like the famous

Bedouin proverb⁵, it was a case of ‘Muslim’ to an outsider, ‘merchant’ to another Muslim, and ‘Turpanlik’ (or ‘one from Turpan’) to another merchant (see Gladney 1996: 469).

Although this argument appears strongly instrumentalist, we would argue that the region-based identity is actually quite essential to what today we call the ‘Uighur’ ethnicity. As L.A. Chvyr (1994: 52) has noted, other minorities (including Turkic-speaking Central Asian populations such as Kazakhs, Uzbeks, etc.) living in Xinjiang do not use the oasis-based ethnonyms to refer to themselves. This practice is entirely a ‘Uighur’ phenomenon, and one that indexes membership in the ‘indigenous’ community of Xinjiang. Interestingly, the archaeological record from the Bronze and Iron Ages demonstrates a similar regionalization of expressed socio-cultural identity in certain traits and styles that continue to appear in one region for many centuries (see Chen & Hiebert 1995; Mallory & Mair 2000: 152). Kamberi (1998: 796-9) has gone so far as to draw parallels between the ancient mummies’ grave goods and modern Uighur crafts of the same oasis. While we do not wish to suggest that these modern and ancient ethnicities are the same, especially since we are dealing with material culture⁶, it seems quite clear that the regionalized nature of peoples’ identity in Xinjiang is a characteristic inherent to the area.

Concluding Thoughts

In his book on Uighur identity, J.J. Rudelson (1997: 157) writes: “While it is almost certain that there were people in the Xinjiang region over 6000 years ago, it is quite unlikely, perhaps impossible, that they are linked to the Turkic people known as the Uyghurs” (1997: 157). As we have argued, this position is not necessarily supported by the archaeological and genetic data, nor even by common sense, unless we find evidence for a complete popular replacement. New identities are formed with every interaction, just as new genetic combinations are created by every act of procreation. Yet these constructions do not spring from a vacuum,

⁵ “I against my brother, my brother and I against our cousin, and we and our cousins together against you!” in Gladney (1998: 827).

⁶ Material culture can maintain form, but not necessarily meaning, over time (see Jones 1997: 126)

but instead are built upon what has come before them. Similarly, an identity is not wielded *or* inherent, but both simultaneously. Like nature and culture, these two facets of identity are engaged in a constant dialectic. Therefore, to deny the essential and primordial characteristics of modern Uighur ethnicity merely because of their constructed and instrumentalist aspects is erroneous and unnecessarily damaging to their nationalist cause (cf. Light 1999).

It is our hope that, by publishing a re-analysis of the multiple lines of evidence to highlight the ambiguities and inherent biases in the Western synthesis, we will provide a theoretical counter-point to the 'proto-Celtic Europeans' narrative and, thereby, educate the public to critically assess what they are being told. Of course, we cannot stop people from misinterpreting and misusing archaeology (see, e.g., Deavin 1997). However, by celebrating the multiple interpretations supported by the available evidence, we can hopefully maintain a more balanced position in socio-political conflicts of the modern world.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: One of the ‘European mummies’ of Western China (Mair 1998).

Figure 2: Han Kangxin’s map of craniometric variation in Xinjiang Province (Mair 1998).

Figure 3: Linguistic tree of the Indo-European family based on the work of Ringe et al. (Mair 1998).

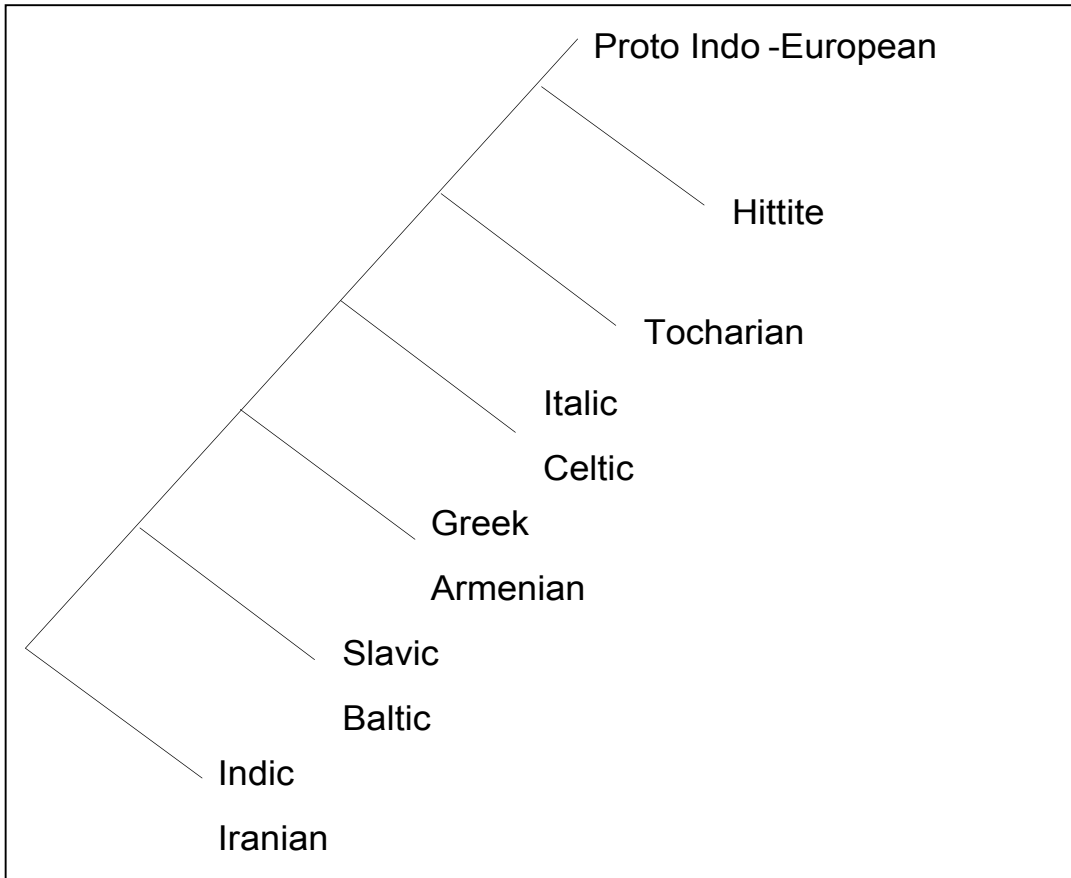
Figure 4: A fragment of the twill-pattern fabrics studied by Irene Good and Elizabeth Barber from the Tarim Basin (Mair 1998).

Figure 5: A map of Chinese cultural expansion from the Bronze Age to the Han Period.

Figure 6: The diverse physical characteristics of the population of Western China (Xinjiang China 1991).

Figure 7: Two principal component analysis diagrams showing the position of the modern Uighur in relation to other populations according to mtDNA and NRY studies (Comas et al. 1998; Zerjal et al. 2002).

Figure 3.



The polished stone objects known as "wrist-guards" found in Early Bronze Age graves in Britain and Continental Europe have proved difficult to interpret. Are they connected with archery, as has long been supposed, or were they instead associated with falconry? Using trained birds of prey for hunting is an elite practice in many historical and ethnographic contexts, and would be consistent with the appearance of exotic materials in these graves. Detailed consideration of the wrist-guards and associated objects from a falconer's perspective, however, demonstrates that the argument is unconvincing. Not surprisingly, this story has come into conflict with Chinese interpretations of the archaeology of Xinjiang Province, and with the history espoused by the oppressed minority groups of the region, including the Uighur. In a recent paper (Thornton & Schurr 2004), we have synthesized the archaeological, linguistic, anthropological, and molecular data that has been published on these "mummies" in an effort to deconstruct the reductionist narrative outlined above. We have further suggested that the Uighurs' nationalistic claim to the archaeological record of Xinjiang Province is not as specific as the Proto-Indo-European homeland (or Indo-European homeland) was the prehistoric urheimat of the Indo-European languages "the region where the proposed common ancestor of those languages, the Proto-Indo-European language (PIE), was originally spoken. From this region, its speakers migrated east and west, and went on to form the proto-communities of the different branches of the language family.